

THE POSTCOLONIAL PLAYGROUND

Colonial narratives in contemporary tourism

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Abstract

This survey of twentieth and twenty-first century novels, guidebooks, magazines, and the social media platform Instagram illustrates the discursive paradigm by which Western backpacking tourists encounter the formerly colonized world. The “postcolonial playground” avails the non-Western world as a theatre for recreation and meaning-making, an engagement which renders locals as accessories to an experience, perpetuating colonial-era power dialectics that continue to privilege the Western subject over the individuals in whose homes they travel. Ideologically and in praxis, the postcolonial playground has become the naturalized disposition of Western tourists seeking their next holiday. In so many words, the formerly colonized world has been re-colonized by tourists, who are oblivious to the regime of privilege that extorts locals in popular tourist destinations.

Keywords: backpacking, tourism, travel, colonialism, neocolonialism, postcolonial

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Introduction

Playgrounds: Nyaung Shwe, Myanmar



The village of Nyaung Shwe sits on the edge of Inle Lake, Myanmar.

Photo by the author.

By 8am the town is seething. The ubiquitous rattle of jackhammers, construction cranes and lorries overbrimming with materials churn together in a clamorous symphony of unrestrained growth, one high-rise hotel after the next climbing to the sky. Local touts proffer guided boat tours, hill treks, motorbike rentals. English signs advertise “authentic” meals, souvenirs, inexpensive accommodation. And everywhere tourists wander the dust-choked streets, pondering the most rewarding ways to part with their money.

Nyaung Shwe is among the latest boomtowns on the frontier of international tourism. Less than a decade ago it was but one of many villages hemming the shores of

Inle Lake, Myanmar, but in recent years it has become the epicenter of one of the world's hottest new destinations. "Everyone" wants to visit Myanmar because "no one" has visited Myanmar: after fifty years of isolation under a military dictatorship, tourism opened officially in 2012,¹ instigating a rush to see the country before it could be heavily developed for tourism. That process is already well underway. In 2015, Myanmar recorded 4.68 million tourist arrivals²—an increase of 585% since 2011—and with a civilian government now in power, this incredible rate of growth looks set to accelerate.

Myanmar is a microcosm of the international tourism industry, a relict bastion of undevelopment that in five years has witnessed a sweeping transformation. Nyaung Shwe is a case in point; profusion of high-rise hotels aside, the economic terrain has fundamentally altered as an agrarian market shifts to a service sector. Former merchants and farmers are now trekking guides, hotel proprietors, taxi operators; the village population is swelling as people throughout the region come looking for work. Given the peculiarity of Myanmar's sudden political clemency, Nyaung Shwe is being developed with unusual rapidity—but the process is familiar the world over. It works like this: tourists begin to frequent a town or region; the wealth they carry overwhelms local industry as it becomes more profitable to cater to tourists' demand for food and accommodation; external investors move in to exploit the demand, overpowering many local efforts; the physical infrastructure of a town or region begins to reflect touristic demand more than local needs; villages like Nyaung Shwe come to look less like a home to local inhabitants and more like a tourist's playground.

In less wealthy countries like Myanmar, tourism development resembles another kind of colonialism. But instead of a colonial administration overseeing tourists' expropriation of local land and resources, asymmetric distributions of capital and a global legal regime privileging Western passport-holders—all legacies of the colonial era—enable tourists' occupying and using local space. Tourist destinations become sites of consumption, while local inhabitants provide the attending labor and the "exotic" flavor to spirit tourists along in a good time.

¹ Simon Roughneen, "Burma just opened up after 50 years. But where are all the tourists?", *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 October 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2012/1020/Burma-just-opened-up-after-50-years.-But-where-are-all-the-tourists>.

² "Tourist arrivals for 2015 reached 4.68m in Myanmar", *Bangkok Post*, 21 January 2016, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asean/834556/tourist-arrivals-for-2015-reached-4-68m-in-myanmar>.

Such comparisons have been made elsewhere,³ although much work remains to be done in establishing the overt economic links between tourism and colonialism. Here, however, I am interested in what makes the process so ideologically seamless. I want to establish why tourists are so accustomed to participating in this kind of development in destinations, and what prevents them seeing this so evidently unjust process as problematic. In other words, why is the playground so naturalized?



A boat tour on Inle Lake, Myanmar. Hue, the driver, was a fisherman before he became a tour operator. Photo by the author.

Like anything else, forms of tourism are bounded by a discourse. The discourse of travel and tourism is distinguished by a perceptive structure I call the “postcolonial playground”, which broadly organizes, influences, and arbitrates Western tourist interaction with the subjects of formerly colonized countries. I establish the parameters of this discourse by surveying twentieth and twenty-first century novels, guidebooks,

³ See Matthew Hartzell, “From Colonialism to Neocolonialism? Geographies of tourism in the Indian Himalaya” (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2008).

magazines, and the social media platform Instagram.⁴ This amalgam of cultural produce reflects a system of beliefs and practices that are widely (if unconsciously) embraced across the Western tourism industry.

While I focus on the contemporary period, it is productive to look to the postcolonial playground's forbear, to which Edward Said gives shape in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). In conducting a sweeping survey of nineteenth-century literature, Said articulates a hegemonic "structure of attitude and reference",⁵ a nearly ubiquitous discourse of perceptions and praxis by which citizens of the imperial center engaged with the colonial margins; with little exception, colonized peoples were cast as inferior and in need of management, the domination of their territories by European powers naturalized as desirable, or even inevitable. With the novel as an interpretive tablet upon which culture is inscribed, Said demonstrates that this worldview permeated the artistic, scientific, economic, and of course political disciplines.

The "structure of attitude and reference" did not vanish with the dissolution of colonial administrations. As a discourse centuries in the making, imperial nations, deprived of their former holdings, did not conceive of new, more equitable methods and philosophies for engaging the former colonies overnight. What changed, principally, were the *terms* of engagement: the metropolitan Westerner traveled to former colonial territories not for reasons of work or administration, but for recreational amusement. Rather than invent new perceptions, new methods for encountering and interacting with formerly colonized peoples, the colonial archive was transmuted relatively smoothly into the postcolonial playground.

I have named eight tropes distinguishing the postcolonial playground, and while all eight may not appear in every work I examine, in most discursive productions involving travel and tourism a surprising number are manifest. In no particular order, these tropes include the following: (1) The former colony and its subjects are presented as exotic, different, "Other". (2) The narrative is interspersed with danger, and with physical and emotional challenge. (3) Locals in the former colony rarely enter into the narrative as fully-fledged human characters, and are more often instruments of danger, aid, or

⁴ Space limits the discussion of what further encompasses films, travel magazines, television shows, advertising, etc.

⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), 71.

exoticism that abet the Westerner's journey/adventure. (4) The locals' urban spaces in the former colony are often portrayed as a decay of a formerly glorious colonial past, while rural areas are often depicted in pre-industrial terms that refer to locals as living in "a past time". (5) The prerogative for the Western subject to take and occupy space is naturalized; while there is challenge and hardship in the former colony, the "right" to be there is never questioned. (6) The journey/adventure leads to self-transformation and personal growth; there is often romance, but the relationship is almost always with another Westerner who is met in the former colony. (7) The former colony is presented as a site of spiritual and/or non-materialist rectitude, an answer to (or positive obverse of) the existential dilemmas of materialism and spiritual vacuity common to the West; the Westerner is portrayed as finding solace or gleaning insight from the "wisdom" of the former colony. And finally, (8) linguistic narratives are written in the first person and are usually penned by white, middle-class, heterosexual men.

The postcolonial playground enables tourists to re-enact the drama of colonial conquest, in both ideological and physical terms. One witnesses not so much an appropriation of colonial motifs as a *perpetuation*, a re-casting of the former relationship between colonizer and colonized in the role of tourist and local. This takes place in a number of ways. First, the exoticization and/or Otherization of a former colony and its subjects continually reinforces an unequal power dialectic, re-affirming the perceived superiority of the West over and against the strange and bizarre foreign. Secondly, the naturalized prerogative for the occupation and appropriation of space fundamentally alters the physical infrastructure and cultural landscape of a tourist destination, refashioning it in forms more pleasurable for tourists. Such dispossession of local spaces infringes upon their humanity, denying them what Johannes Fabian calls "coevalness".⁶ Lastly, the apprehension of former colonies as spaces in which the Western tourist can ply their existential crises, experience romance, and achieve actualization is another form of Western domination, for the tourist industry is largely unidirectional—Western subjects may travel in formerly colonized countries, but subjects of the former colony are rarely afforded the opportunity to travel in the West, except as laborers. Formerly

⁶ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

colonized countries are reconstituted as subject territories, but instead of natural resources and labor, the “capital” being extracted is recreation and personal growth.



Backpackers await a bus in the village of Kasol, Himachal Pradesh, India.

Photo by the author.

With over 1.2 billion people traveling annually as of last year,⁷ there are myriad entry points into international tourism; I might, however, begin with my own. I arrived in Myanmar with a single backpack, young, educated, middle-class, Western, white; a kind of poster child for one of international tourism’s most rapidly burgeoning demographics. As a class of tourists, “backpackers” display enough regular characteristics to constitute a definite, recognizable subculture. Backpackers tend to travel lightly, on a budget, and for extended periods, conditions enabling—but not exclusive to—younger tourists. This style of travel has become so popular among young people that a recent article in *The Atlantic*

⁷ World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), “International tourist arrivals up 4% reach a record 1.2 billion in 2015”, 18 January 2016, <http://media.unwto.org/press-release/2016-01-18/international-tourist-arrivals-4-reach-record-12-billion-2015>.

named backpacking a modern-day “rite of passage”;⁸ yet it remains a largely Western rite. While young people in East Asia and South America are increasingly adopting backpacker-style travel,⁹ passport regulations and currency exchange rates strongly favor citizens of Western countries. Consequently, the vast majority of backpackers hail from former imperial centers in Western Europe, wealthy post-colonies like Australia and Canada, or from Western subcultures such as those in Israel and South Africa.¹⁰ But even for those who grew up far from the loci of Western cultural production, backpacking inculcates participants into the Western episteme.¹¹ Perhaps most importantly, almost all young people who have embarked on a backpacking trip report that it has “life-changing” consequences for their worldview and sense of identity,¹² which has long-ranging implications for the way they perceive the non-Western world in the future.

With an emphasis on existential experience and adventure, backpacking is more beholden to the postcolonial playground than perhaps any other form of modern tourism. So while this discourse reaches far beyond backpacking culture, encompassing almost all forms of Western tourism and influencing the way the non-Western world is perceived across society, I will focus specifically on backpacking tourism. My first reason is admittedly personal. Throughout many years’ travel as a self-identified backpacker in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and Southern Africa, I too became enwrapped in the postcolonial playground; I want to understand why. Secondly, if the backpacking trip has indeed become a modern rite-of-passage, it is an experience that most middle-class Western adults will have undertaken, or will at some point have aspired to undertake; therefore the ideas formed during the backpacking trip will impact the backpacker’s perceptions and actions long into the future. Studying backpacking tourism culture may

⁸ Amanda Machado, “Traveling Teaches Students in A Way Schools Can’t”, *The Atlantic*, December 1, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/12/traveling-offers-lessons-that-us-schools-fail-to-provide/383090/>.

⁹ Peggy Teo and Sandra Leong, “A Postcolonial Analysis of Backpacking”, *Annals of Tourism Research* 33.1 (2006): 109-131.

¹⁰ See Anders Sørensen, “Backpacker Ethnography”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30.4 (2003): 852; Camille Caprioglio O’Reilly, “From Drifter to Gap Year Tourist: Mainstreaming Backpacker Travel”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33.4 (2006): 1001; Mark Hampton, *Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development: Perspectives From the Less-Developed World* (Routledge: 2013), 3.

¹¹ Chaim Noy, “This Trip Really Changed Me: Backpacker’s Narratives of Self-Change”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 31.1 (2004): 78-102.

¹² Turn Elsrud, “Risk Creation in Traveling: Backpacker Adventure Narration”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 28.3 (2001): 597.

shed important light on the basis for social ideations of the non-Western world. Finally, backpackers are typically the best-educated, most mobile members of their society; there is a (perhaps quixotic) chance that, if anyone is to change their tourism practice, backpackers may be the first to achieve it.

While I am entering this discussion as someone with firsthand experience of a global phenomenon, I am building on an academic debate about backpacking that has been developing with vigor for the past two decades. Very little has been done, however, to conclusively link backpacking tourism with colonial narratives, a process vital to understanding why Western tourists regard their passports as *carte blanche* for taking and occupying space in the formerly colonized world. In Chapter One, I discuss the evolution of the modern literary travel-consciousness and how centuries of European literature inform contemporary tourist discourse. In Chapter Two, I look directly at tourism itself, specifically at the edification of backpacking culture and praxis. In Chapter Three, I turn to guidebooks, reviewing how the seemingly most innocuous tool in tourism is in fact a fundamental element ingratiating the tourist imaginary with colonial motifs. In Chapter Four, I look at the social media platform Instagram, where I consider the regime of privilege enabling travel foregrounded by fantasies of assimilation and the trope of revitalization vis-à-vis the subaltern.

Finally, I consider efforts to decolonize tourism discourse, looking at what it might mean to foster a more equitable engagement. Ultimately, I approach this study in the hopes that, if it can be understood how colonial-era power disparities persist, it may become easier to write, photograph, speak and—most of all—*travel* in a way that affirms human dignity.

Chapter I

Architects of the Postcolonial Playground: The Formation of a Literary Travel-Consciousness

As a contemporary Western mode of perceiving the Other, the postcolonial playground is a historical construct as much as a living discourse. Understanding the meaning and ramifications of discourse itself is first necessary, before I approach the historical genealogy of the postcolonial playground.

Discourse is more than an exchange of words, although there is much to remark upon in the conversations between backpackers in well-frequented guesthouses. Here, I intend for discourse to describe the multifarious social process of establishing value and practice. This ever-fluctuating process is contrived as much in day-to-day conversation between civilians as it is in the statements of political leaders and social demagogues, in the approbation of economic regimes, in fashionable perspectives and social movements. Discourse is transacted in the arts, literature, film, music, multiple forms of media that now, of course, perambulate the Internet with its various epicenters of Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. As Michel Foucault said, discourse is composed by the production and evaluation of truth:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true: the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for

obtaining truth: the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.¹³

In short, every social being is beholden to discourse, or a set of truths that are generally acknowledged as valid within a given society, and are accepted to varying degrees by the individual. However, crucially, discourse *shapes the way* one approaches the truth-making process, so that even if an individual does not necessarily agree with a generally acknowledged set of truths, their system of evaluation is still bounded by the “regime” that created these truths. Edward Said put this another way in his landmark study *Orientalism* (1979), arguing that “for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* [sic] actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second”.¹⁴ Despite striving for objectivity, most people are ensconced in the predominant discourse of their respective societies.

By its very nature, truth-making is imbricated in structures of power. As Foucault firmly reminds us, no truth can be enfranchised without the support of some authoritative institution, possessing of the means of enforcement. Discourse, then, is both what is widely regarded as true, and what “has the power to *make itself true*”;¹⁵ the “general politics of truth” are negotiated on an unequal playing field, and veracity is often secured by the strongest player. Said describes the mutually constitutive relationship between power and the production of knowledge, arguing that power distinguishes who has the capacity to *know*—that is, to create knowledge—and who cannot prevent themselves from *being known*. In the long history of colonialism, one of the primary tasks of imperial administrations was to document and describe the peoples and lands being dominated, to both better execute their ventures and to safeguard their interests. In *Orientalism*, he contends that:

¹³ Michel Foucault, “Truth and power: an interview with Alessandro Fontano and Pasquale Pasquino”, in *Michel Foucault: Power/Truth/Strategy*, ed. M. Morris and P. Patton (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979), 48.

¹⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Routledge, 1979), 11.

¹⁵ Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power”, *Formations of Modernity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 76.

The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could* be—that is, submitted to being—*made* Oriental. There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman.¹⁶

While the Orient was being explored, documented, and written about, the West received no such explorers, anthropologists, and sentimental travelers precisely because colonization is not an equal exchange. Egypt, for instance, did not possess the military might and political capital to initiate a project of discovery in France. Yet during Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt, a knowledge-making project secured enough information to publish the *Description de l’Égypte*, twenty-three tremendous volumes collected by a vast team of scientists, archaeologists, historians, cartographers, and medical professionals.¹⁷ As Mary Louise Pratt describes in *Imperial Eyes* (1992), this process of collecting information, common to all colonial entities, is an extractive contingency of power, for “discovery in this context consisted of a gesture of converting local knowledges (discourses) into European national and continental knowledges associated with European forms and relations of power”.¹⁸ Europeans did not create knowledge so much as take it by force, then adapt it to validate European notions of superiority. The colonized rarely, if ever, had similar power to requisition knowledge from the European colonizer.

Yet the power to collect information, evaluate and assess it—in other words, to render discourse—is not restricted to such surveys as the *Description*; as with the above example of Gustave Flaubert, the creation of colonial discourse was undertaken in the realms of literature and travelogue as well. As Said asserts, “From travelers’ tales, and not only from great institutions like the various India companies, colonies were created and ethnocentric perspectives secured”.¹⁹ Flaubert had the power to render the Egyptian

¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 5-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 84.

¹⁸ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 202.

¹⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 117.

courtesan into prose for an exclusively European audience, whether she approved of his words or not; he was able to depict her by virtue of his ability to place himself in Egypt, a function of his wealth and political capital as a French national. Moreover, in writing about a foreign locale, travelers almost always reaffirmed colonialist values of racial superiority, the desirability of European management, and the inefficiency, juvenility, or “savagery” of non-European peoples. As Pratt details in her study, sentimental travel writing—that is, emotive, first-person narrations—emerged suddenly and forcefully in the late eighteenth century “as a powerful mode for representing colonial relations and the imperial frontier”.²⁰ Sentimental, first-person narration has since remained a constant instrument in the creation of imperial metropolitan discourse about the Other, while the Other has had scarce few opportunities for her thoughts and ideas to be read with the pronoun “I”.

Particularly when read within the metropolis by subjects who have never had—likely will never have—the opportunity to travel to a place depicted in prose, texts acquire an imaginative density that ultimately overtakes the place itself; texts begin to supplant reality, and as a corpus of literature is formed, texts *more* than place begin to act as the primary locus of generative knowledge. Thereby, subjects of a given discourse will draw upon the extant texts in any new production of writing, and as will be particularly salient in my later discussion of guidebooks, texts can end up scripting experience itself. As Said describes:

[S]uch texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, of what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it. This kind of text is composed out of those pre-existing units of information deposited by Flaubert in the catalogue of *idées reçues*.²¹

²⁰ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 87.

²¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 94.

Thus the traveler's experience in a destination is circumscribed by the discourse of all that has been written about the destination already and, as Said argues, further writings about the destination are more beholden to the discourse than to a primary experience in the destination itself. Simon Gikandi comments on the terrific "extent to which the narrative of travel derives its authority from its pre-texts as much as from original observations",²² noting the incredible staying power of prior texts; exploration narratives tended to rely heavily on the writings produced from previous sojourns in the colonial frontier. This reliance was so significant that, in many circumstances, prior texts overwrote an experience that may have generated new findings. Tourism, itself a recreational re-imagining of colonial exploration, inherited this tendency.

The tourist, just like the subject of empire, is enmeshed in a well-established discourse about the Other, which has been contrived over the course of a long history in unequal power relations. Indeed, discourse about the formerly colonized Other is *inextricable* from the long centuries of colonial subjugation; the West's conception of what is now often called the "developing" world was founded in the knowledge-making processes undertaken by colonial administrations, aided and abetted by travelers, over which the colonized world *had no say*. These texts, methodologies and cultural myths form the backbone of the contemporary tourism industry, shaping how the individual Western tourist encounters their foreign destination.

Before moving ahead, two terms in particular should be defined. The first, "postcolonial", is notoriously slippery²³ and is often used to denote conditions ranging from the state of no longer being an explicit colonial entity to a theoretical politics concerned with dismantling the enduring legacies of colonialism (what many term *neo-colonialism*). My own definition reflects the latter condition, which Robert Young clarifies:

Postcolonial theory involves a political analysis of the cultural history of colonialism, and investigates its contemporary effects in western and

²² Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 97.

²³ See, among others, Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (Routledge, 2002).

tricontinental cultures, making connections between that past and the politics of the present.²⁴

As the rest of this chapter illustrates, disentangling the present state of postcolonial playground discourse necessitates a critical consideration of its colonial precedent, revealing in some parts what has changed in the way the West conceives of travel and tourism and, what is more often the case, indeed how much has remained the same.

It is of further importance to define “the West”. Stuart Hall shows how “‘the West’ is a *historical*, not a geographical, construct”, representing an epistemological formation that is, by its own identification, “developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern”.²⁵ The Western construct arose out of a historical process that saw European powers overpower most of the world by the nineteenth century, and which now, even after colonies have been for the most part granted independence,²⁶ maintains dominance through the prevailing economic order and in various hegemonic forms of soft power. Thus so-called “Western” countries include the former imperial entities of the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands,²⁷ as well as former colonies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.²⁸ This demarcation breaks down considerably when submitted to a class evaluation, wherein it could be argued that many of the so-called non-Western world’s richest members lead an obviously “Western” lifestyle; the distinction becomes far murkier when one considers the extent to which music and film from the USA are consumed throughout the world, or

²⁴ Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 6.

²⁵ Hall, “The West and the Rest”, 186 (emphasis in original).

²⁶ Young writes in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (3) that “the list of colonies, dependent, trust and unincorporated territories, overseas departments, and other such names signifying colonial status in some form is still surprisingly long (still-extant colonies that enjoy a wide diversity of labels designating their subordinate status as dependent territories include British Gibraltar, the Falklands/Malvinas and a dozen other islands; Danish Greenland; Dutch Antilles; French Guiana, Martinique, Réunion, St. Pierre and Miquelon, off Newfoundland; US Puerto Rico, Samoa, Virgin Islands; Spanish Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands). Many islands of the Pacific remain colonies of France and the US.”

²⁷ A more exhaustive list would incorporate most of the geographically Western European nations (with the exception of Ireland, for instance).

²⁸ A distinction should also be made for countries such as South Africa and Israel, in which exist significant portions of the population that identify as “Western”.

how “Western” technologies or even food products are vaunted as middle-class idylls. Suffice to say that, as a construct, “the West” has never ceased its expansion.²⁹

The postcolonial playground should thus be situated as the latest permutation in a broader, Western discursive category of almost six centuries’ evolution in the way people think about, talk about, and experience travel. The Western discourse of travel was first conceived with the journals of the first Portuguese explorers edging down the West African coast in the mid-fifteenth century, to be followed later by Christopher Columbus’ record of his journey to the West Indies in 1492. Journals and accounts of these early explorations, describing—often fancifully—peoples and lands quite different from the European norm were a significant impetus in the establishment of a self-conscious “Western” identity, by which nations such as Portugal, Spain, France, and England found common cause vis-à-vis strange and definitively Other peoples in Africa, the Americas, and the Far East.³⁰ Early on, lands that lay beyond the Western pale became spaces in which the European imaginary could project and negotiate issues of identity; Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) was set on an island in the “New World”, where an idyllic society offered a legal model and Christian example for contemporary European governments. As well-known travelogues such as *Coryat’s Crudities* (1611) remained popular with the literate European public, one of the first English-language novels, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), undertook to depict a shipwreck survivor establishing a one-man colony governed by Christian values. Not insignificantly, European literature was birthed far from the shores of Europe.³¹

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said argues that European literary production was intimately bound up in the maintenance of empire, “almost unnoticeably sustaining society’s consent in overseas expansion” by naturalizing the place of distant colonies in the social imaginary.³² European literature in the nineteenth century did not necessarily focus on narratives of colonial action or foreign adventure, but with a “contrapuntal” reading, Said demonstrates that even in the most classic titles of

²⁹ For further detail, see Gayatri Spivak on epistemic violence in “Can the subaltern speak?”, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson Cary Lawrence Grossberg (Macmillan Education UK, 1988), 271-313.

³⁰ Hall, “The West and the Rest”, 188.

³¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii.

³² *Ibid*, 12.

apparently domestic subject matter, colonial holdings are indispensable to the contrivance of plot. Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) figures prominently in this analysis; while the narrated events take place in England, it is the Caribbean plantation in Antigua owned by Sir Thomas that finances the Bertram's aristocratic estate.³³ Colonialism, as a system of foreign domination for the purpose of generating European wealth, was ingratiated to the reading public as a matter of course, a natural dispensation of the national interest. The arts were instrumental in creating a naturalized discourse of colonial power relations, as with a complacent or even approbatory public, colonial governments in Britain and France could continue unharassed in the effort to conquer the globe.

The turn of the century witnessed the emergence of a distinctly colonial-era literary tradition, the vanguard of which comprised the likes of Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling. Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is still frequent required reading of the Western literary canon, was heavily influenced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explorations of Africa. Idolizing the likes of Mungo Park (*Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, 1779) and Richard Francis Burton (*The Lake Regions of Central Africa*, 1860), in an oft-recounted anecdote, a ten-year old Conrad placed a finger in the blank space on a map of Africa and determined, "when I grow up I shall go there".³⁴ While Conrad wrote varied critiques of imperialism, such as *Nostromo* (1904) and "An Outpost of Progress" (1896), *Heart of Darkness* may also be associated with a British literary genre that foregrounded Africa as the setting of adventure and romance. Novels such as *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and *Sanders of the River* (1911) narrated British exploits in colonial Africa, sustaining Africa's place in the domestic imaginary as "a free field for the play of European fantasy".³⁵ The early inscriptions of Western identity when contrasted with a foreign Other were replayed, as the best characteristics of British culture were articulated against the uncivilized paganism of Africa's indigenous peoples.³⁶ Only India surpassed Africa as a site of imaginative literary production, in

³³ Ibid, 110.

³⁴ Jeffrey Meyers, *Joseph Conrad: A Biography* (Cooper Square Press, 2001), 92.

³⁵ Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow, *The Africa That Never Was: Four centuries of British writing about Africa* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), 12.

³⁶ Ibid, 11.

which Kipling was merely the foremost among many British authors to depict the subcontinent in fiction.³⁷

Almost all novels of the colonial-era tradition maintained one common feature, in that protagonists rarely remained in one place; travel was a central, if not axiomatic feature of the genre.³⁸ Conrad's Marlow journeyed up the River Congo; the peregrinations of Kipling's Kim familiarized readers with the staggering diversity of Indian peoples and landscapes; Haggard's Quatermain endured frozen mountains, scorching deserts, and dangerous wildlife to reach the fabled mines of King Solomon. As the exploits of these fictional adventurers rhapsodized the bygone era of European exploration, recreational tourism—a comfortable and safe means of re-creating the journeys of early European explorers—was reaching unprecedented popularity. As Mark Twain wrote of his voyage to Europe in the bestselling *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), he was “drifting with the tide of a great popular movement”.³⁹

Contemporary tourism, or rather travel as a leisure activity, emerged around the middle of the eighteenth century with the Grand Tour. Young men of the aristocracy would embark upon an often year-long circuit of the seats of Continental learning and art, to refine their languages, manners and tastes before ascension to leadership roles within their home societies; in a word, the Tour was a kind of “travel-based ‘finishing school’”.⁴⁰ Memorialized in Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768), beyond a kind of class education, young Tourists discovered many of the finer pleasures of travel in sex, drinking, and beautiful landscapes. The Grand Tour remained a primarily upper-class practice into the mid-nineteenth century, when rail travel enabled the middle class to make journeys of leisure. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874), set in 1820s-1830s provincial England, Dorothea honeymooned in Rome where she encounters Will Ladislaw, who like many of his peers is acquainting himself with the contemporary art scene. In a striking parallel, years later when Will has returned and finally consummates his love for Dorothea at the novel's conclusion, the first tracks of a railroad are being laid through the Middlemarch district.

³⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 160.

³⁸ Hammond and Jablow, *The Africa That Never Was*, 11.

³⁹ Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11.

⁴⁰ Hampton, *Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development*, 6.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, middle-class tourists were not usually undertaking great ventures to Africa, South America, or East Asia, preferring rather the safety and predictability of European sightseeing. However, the brief review conducted here of literature during the period offers two basic, generalized tenets by which the early discourse of tourism may be understood: for one, European tourists were aware of their role as subjects of imperial powers, and for the most part accepted the colonial bifurcation of *superior* and *inferior* races and/or cultures. Second, novels such as *King Solomon's Mines*, which achieved immense popularity almost immediately upon publication, cast foreign spaces as theatres of adventure, wherein travel provides the debonair subject of a *superior* empire opportunities to cavort, enjoy, and romance in an exotic, yet *inferior* locale. While this relationship was somewhat problematized in the circumstance of Western subjects on a sightseeing trip in Western Europe, the tendency to vaunt one's own society in comparison to the foreign was a familiar trope, even amongst European nations; one of the lesser invectives in *The Innocents Abroad*, by far the most popular of Twain's works during his lifetime, is how his party of Americans had "no time to fool away on every ass that wanted to drivell Greek platitudes at us".⁴¹ The empiricism of superior-inferior would have far greater implications for twentieth-century tourism, when travelers began to visit the formerly colonized world.

Still widely appreciated among contemporary travelers, one of the first novels about tourism was written by an American traveling in Spain and France. Ernest Hemingway's heavily autobiographical *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) was influenced by his trip to the running of the bulls festival in the company of several British and American friends, and illustrates the hedonism and messy romance of a foreign holiday that would not be unfamiliar to many twenty-first century tourists. First-person narration by protagonist Jake Barnes reveals a conscientiousness that somewhat regrets the cavalier recklessness his friends exhibit in Pamplona, though he is seemingly unwilling to obstruct them. In a telling episode, Jake enables a rendezvous between his friend, Lady Brett Ashley, and a young bullfighting protégé, Pedro Romero, which openly flaunts a Spanish bullfighting code of conduct and loses him the respect of the local community of bullfighting aficionados with whom he was previously respected. Fluent in Spanish and

⁴¹ Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*, 59.

French and familiar with the countries, Jake's relationship with the foreign space is nuanced and reflective, while his friends treat the Spanish fiesta town as an unmitigated playground, where they are exonerated from outlandish behaviors that would incur reprobation at home.

Travel and tourism changed significantly toward the middle of the twentieth century. While many soon-to-be popular locations remained only within the rarified purview of the elite and well-to-do (e.g. Bali, the Caribbean islands, the more fashionable Mediterranean islands), innovative modes of transportation, usually pioneered by the younger generation, overcame the financial obstacles of travel and made certain previously far-flung destinations accessible. This is when a younger subculture of travel began to diverge, mirroring the existential dilemmas of the 1950s, the revolutionary optimism of the 1960s, and the widespread disaffection of the 1970s in youth movements across a multitude of countries. The developments, disjunctions, and, in many cases, daring exhibited by young travelers during this period paved the way for the emergence of backpacking as a widespread phenomenon in the 1980s.

One of the new methods of transportation undertaken to cut costs was hitchhiking, which soon became a cornerstone to many mid-century sojourns. The flagship work of this mode, if not the most seminal travel novel of the twentieth century, is Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), the literary apotheosis of the Beat Generation's lust for authenticity and the canonical model for that still-relevant rite of passage, the great American road trip. Sal Paradise, Kerouac's alter-ego and the novel's protagonist, sets out west in 1947 hitchhiking from the east coast. He completes five circuits across the continental USA, often landing in California and once in Mexico, making friends, taking lovers and meeting the pseudonymous characters of the real-world Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, who along with Kerouac would comprise the vanguard of the Beats. *On the Road* is one of the first times that the act of travel is articulated as an end in itself, a kind of vehicle for experience and actualization that made a definite break from the sightseeing or leisurely activities that characterized most forms of organized tourism. Without much more than an end goal in mind—often to reach San Francisco—Kerouac strikes out hitchhiking, for “Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions,

everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me”.⁴² The drive for spontaneous, vivified experience, and the confidence that it would come if one just lived with the proper enthusiasm, became a hallmark of the Beat mentality and inaugurated a new style of traveling—or at least established its ideal. At the time, Kerouac’s novel offered significant motivation for young people to “‘just do it’ and get travelling”,⁴³ and today it maintains a distinct popularity among backpackers.⁴⁴

The extraordinary development of leftist politics, alternative styles of living and interest in spirituality famously overtook Western (and many other) countries in the 1960s, finding a concomitant echo in literature and music; the 1960s was also the period in which a fascination with travel abroad took root in younger generations. Kerouac added his two cents with *The Dharma Bums* (1959), another fictionally embellished autobiography ambulating his relationship with the poet Gary Snyder, the pseudonymously named Japhy Ryder whose study of Buddhist teachings and practice temporarily enraptured Kerouac. Snyder spent many years in Japan as a devoted student of Zen, and in his poetry a deep undercurrent of the teachings are braided with his reverence for nature, as in *The Back Country* (1967) and *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (1969). Many young people gravitated toward the notion that Eastern countries held a spiritual resonance not found in the West and, as I will discuss more extensively in Chapter Two, an overland route from Europe to India and Nepal developed as tens of thousands of young people sought out spiritual insight, adventure, and legal hashish. Many literary and musical figures lead the movement eastward, such as Allen Ginsberg (*Howl and Other Poems*, 1956) in his stay with Peter Orlovsky in Calcutta and Varanasi from 1962-3. The Beatles embarked on a meditative retreat to Rishikesh in 1968, where in a bout of productivity they wrote most of the songs that would make it onto *The Beatles* (the White Album) later that year. The publicity generated by these travels (The Beatles, for instance, arrived with an entire reporting crew) solidified the repute of places like India as an exotic destination with spiritual secrets waiting to be unlocked, and perpetuated the naturalized presence of Western subjects in formerly colonized countries.

⁴² Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (Penguin, 2000), 5.

⁴³ Hampton, *Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development*, 7.

⁴⁴ Julie Wilson and Greg Richards, “Backpacker Icons: Influential Literary ‘Nomads’ in the Formation of Backpacker Identities”, in *The Global Nomad*, ed. J. Wilson and G. Richards (Channel View Publications, 2004), 139.

In the United States, the optimism of the 1960s collapsed in a brutal draft war, the routing of radical social movements and the election of Richard Nixon. The kind of metaphysical salvation promised by travel could be salvaged by escapism: in the literal case, young men went abroad to avoid being conscripted into the Vietnam War;⁴⁵ more broadly, travel afforded a means of temporarily unburdening oneself from a bitter reality. Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) is at once elegy for the crushed spirit of the 1960s and sardonic fanfare, inaugurating a cynical era that exchanged aspiration for hedonism. Accompanied by his friend and putative attorney, Dr. Gonzo, journalist Raoul Duke heads to Las Vegas to cover a pair of stories, during which the two embark on a drug frenzy that cuts to the heart of the changing face of the "American Dream". The road trip is not sought for its changing power, but as a means out: "Every now and then when your life gets complicated and the weasels start closing in, the only real cure is to load up on heinous chemicals and then drive like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas".⁴⁶ Perhaps even more than the promise of escape, the novel continues to be embraced by backpackers in particular for the experience-driven mantra, "Buy the ticket, take the ride",⁴⁷ a sentiment that finds resonance in such works as *The Beach* (1996).

As the style and direction of travel narratives changed, certain core elements remained very much the same. Along with Thompson, among the most prominent authors that today continue to maintain a "symbolic ability to stimulate" backpacking-style travel are Ernest Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, Paul Theroux, Bruce Chatwin, and Bill Bryson.⁴⁸ Also like Thompson, these authors are white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male; in other words, they embody the nineteenth century's prototypical colonialist and the demographic most consistently engaged with travel writing, which has long "been mainly a male preserve, certainly one associated with exploration, scientific discovery and imperial quest".⁴⁹ Moreover, as most of these authors' writings were either memoirs or

⁴⁵ Hampton, *Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development*, 8.

⁴⁶ Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A savage journey to the heart of the American dream* (Vintage, 2010), 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 40.

⁴⁸ Wilson and Richards, "Backpacker Icons: Influential Literary 'Nomads' in the Formation of Backpacker Identities", 143.

⁴⁹ Graham Dann, "Writing out the Tourist in space and time", *Annals of Tourism Research* 26.1 (1989): 170.

thinly veiled autobiographical novels, their narratives were written in the first person, a choice almost always maintained today in travel-themed literature.

As travel abroad became more commonplace in the 1970s, Paul Theroux emerged as one of its chief narrators, albeit hardly in any countercultural sense. Somewhat mystifyingly given his routine bouts of unabashed racism, Theroux is still upheld as a canonical figure of late twentieth-century travel writing. *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975), a memoir about his travel by rail on a circuit around Asia, is rife with Raj-era atavisms that far surpass the slurs used by one of Theroux's heroes, Kipling. He reserves little respect for "Bengalis, whose complexion resembles that of the black goddess of destruction they worship, and who have the same sharp hook to their noses",⁵⁰ or indeed for almost any of the individuals he meets on his cross-continental trip. Constantly unimpressed by the sights, revolted by the people and embittered by the occasional difficulty in securing a drink, Theroux's bilious depredations of any and all unfortunate enough to make his acquaintance on this journey make one wonder why he left home in the first place.

A particularly incriminating episode comes in Lahore, Pakistan, as Theroux plans a stopover in the city where the eponymous Kim of Kipling's novel grew up. One can read Theroux's nose wrinkling as he finds that Lahore "retained the distracted exoticism Kipling mentions, though now, with a hundred years of repetition, it is touched with horror".⁵¹ Theroux does reserve some praise for the architecture of "moghul and colonial splendour", but finds it ill-accompanied by the city's current inhabitants, whose "dereliction makes the [architecture's] grandeur emphatic, as the cooking fat and cow-dung makes the smells of perfume and joss-sticks keener".⁵² With a wistful look back at the era of British colonialism and the Moghul empire preceding it, Theroux finds that the "pleasures of Lahore are old, and though one sees attempts everywhere, the Pakistanis have not yet succeeded in turning this beautiful city into a ruin".⁵³ After this brief spate of cheer, the intrepid author is then forced to contend with an underabundance of taxis, a

⁵⁰ Paul Theroux, *The Great Railway Bazaar* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 59.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 50.

deserted Anglophone club, and offers of hashish and prostitutes before he at last finds an expensive beer and a white man to talk to.

Aside from the plentitude of low-hanging fruit offered by this classically Orientalist diatribe, Theroux articulates one of the most widespread and contemporary trends in travel and tourism writing: fascination with a colonial past that far exceeds interest in a city's present-day circumstances. Open up a guidebook to a city in the formerly colonized world (as I do in Chapter Three), and one will find that the chief sightseeing attractions are typically colonial or pre-colonial monuments and architecture; read deeply in travel literature and memoirs and the theme develops with rigor. In his essay "Outside the Whale" (1984), Salman Rushdie decries a "Raj revival" taking place across British cinema and literature, during which time the grossest of Indian stereotypes were embraced in a rush of enthusiasm for the fondly-remembered British empire. Invariably, the television shows and films Rushdie discusses focused on the "officer class and its wife", consigning Indians to "bit players in their own history"⁵⁴. Rushdie contends that the form of such productions "insists that *they are the ones whose stories matter*".⁵⁵ This myopic focus on the colonizers themselves, with only (at best) token reference to the people whose lands Britain was occupying, subsumes both the role played by Indians in their independence and their humanity as agents in making their own future. Moreover, the reality of colonialism is entirely occluded; the violence and repression that characterized almost every regime is whitewashed. And as Theroux too readily exhibits, the tendency to portray the contemporary period as decayed, a kind of disfigurement upon an otherwise noble colonial past, is pejorative in the extreme perpetuating as it does the image of non-Western peoples as inferior.

Bruce Chatwin, another oft-cited travel writer, presents a more complex figure than Theroux. After publishing the widely read *In Patagonia* (1977), a decade later and two years before his death Chatwin produced *The Songlines* (1987), a fictionalized account of his inquiry into Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime. A "songline" is a kind of geographical navigation instrument and manifest numen in song, preserved from Dreamtime, the Aboriginal creation period in which the ancestors sang the world into

⁵⁴ Salman Rushdie, "Outside the Whale", *Granta*, 1 March 1984, accessed 9 January 2016, <http://granta.com/outside-the-whale>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

existence. Chatwin—or in the narrative, his mildly fictionalized character—is interested in nomadism the world over, in the “secret of their timeless and irreverent vitality”,⁵⁶ and in seeking its unraveling he chooses to investigate one of the world’s longest-extant cultures. Chatwin’s “pseudo-ethnographic fiction”⁵⁷ is intended as a serious inquiry into Aboriginal songlines, in which Chatwin finds “metaphors for the nomadic instincts common to... the human species”.⁵⁸

The biggest shortcoming of the work is that Chatwin’s inquiry is almost entirely mediated through white Australians, an expedient supposedly made necessary by the long and brutal history of Aboriginal disenfranchisement and their requisite distrust of any outsiders. Instead of direct interaction with Aborigines, the novel is made up primarily of conversations Chatwin has with various Australian allies of the land rights movement, all of whom have spent years developing relationships with Aboriginal individuals and communities and advocating for their autonomy against a repressive and extortionist government. Whether or not it was the only means, this kind of tertiary representation of mythos and practice is difficult to digest as valid; this is perhaps also why Chatwin claimed the work as a piece of fiction. While it is typically Orientalist to represent those whom ought to represent themselves, Chatwin’s remains one of the few widely read prosaic works that address Aboriginal culture and, crucially, land rights. The question, in a way, is whether an imperfect work (as one might argue, all writing inevitably is) is better than no work at all. Graham Huggan acknowledges that it is murky whether Chatwin is “speaking *with* the ‘other’ or *for* the ‘other’”, but argues that Chatwin’s “self-conscious” writing is “well aware of the contradictions inherent in ethnographic narrative”.⁵⁹ A scrupulous reader, then, appreciates this kind of text with a generous pinch of salt.

Chatwin is an exemplar, however, of a particularly rampant form of exoticization in travel writing in which the non-Western world is presented as a place of solvency in opposition to Western existential dilemmas. John Hutnyk describes this as a popular

⁵⁶ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (Random House, 1998), 18.

⁵⁷ Graham Huggan, "Maps, Dreams, and the Presentation of Ethnographic Narrative: Hugh Brody's 'Maps and Dreams' and Bruce Chatwin's 'The Songlines'," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 22.1 (1991): 57.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 58.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 66.

travel imaginary, wherein “a country represented as poverty-stricken [contains] attractive ‘life essences’ highly sought after by Western backpacking tourists seeking ‘spiritual truths’”.⁶⁰ When he first became interested in nomads, Chatwin’s protagonist writes in *The Songlines*, he was working as an art expert in New York City. After going temporarily blind, his doctor recommended he seek out “some long horizons”, so Chatwin goes “to Africa, to the Sudan”.⁶¹ There, he sets out by camel with a nomad named Mahmoud into the desert: “At night, lying awake under the stars, the cities of the West seemed sad and alien—and the pretensions of the ‘art world’ idiotic. Yet here I had a sense of homecoming”.⁶² Seeking healing from physical duress—in Africa, no less—Chatwin additionally finds a cure for his peculiarly Western existential maladies.

The restorative power of the non-Western world parallels a narrative structure identified by Slavoj Žižek, who describes the same relationship constituted between the wealthy and the poor. Kipling, he says, was one of the first to employ the form in *Captains Courageous* (1897), in which “a young rich person in crisis... gets his (or her) vitality restored through brief intimate contact with the full-blooded life of the poor”.⁶³ This structure is perhaps most famously depicted in the film *Titanic* (1997), where pretty, wealthy protagonist Rose falls in love with poor, roguish Jack and vows to abandon her life of privilege to live in happy poverty in New York. The ship hitting the iceberg, Žižek points out, averts “what would undoubtedly have been the true catastrophe, namely the couple's life in New York”; it was well that Jack froze to death instead of him and Rose succumbing to the slow freeze of their love, as Rose discovered that poverty involved rather more than—as depicted in the film—dancing joyously on tabletop in third class.⁶⁴ Jack’s role had to be expendable:

Beneath the story of a love affair, *Titanic* tells another story, that of a spoiled high-society girl with an identity crisis: she is confused, doesn't know what to do with herself, and [Jack], much more than just her love partner, is a kind of

⁶⁰ John Hutnyk, quoted in Peggy Teo and Sandra Leong, “A Postcolonial Analysis of Backpacking”, *Annals of Tourism Research* 33.1 (2006): 111.

⁶¹ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (Random House: 1998), 17.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶³ Slavoj Žižek, “Avatar: Return of the natives”, *New Statesman*, 4 March 2010, <http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2010/03/avatar-reality-love-couple-sex>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

"vanishing mediator" whose function is to restore her sense of identity and purpose in life.⁶⁵

Similarly, Chatwin, or any of the numerous travel writers who extol the restorative wonders of the non-Western world, does not abandon his life in the Western metropolis and settle down to a wandering life among the nomads. He has an excellent passport, he has money, he can return home when he has had enough of desert living; until then, though, he may embark on "a Kiplingesque quest to test the mettle of one's independence (whiteness) in the fire of the exotic".⁶⁶ Mahmoud, Chatwin's traveling companion who "was immune to everything we could call 'progress'",⁶⁷ would also not be immune from the lot of most of the world's nomads: gradual expropriation of land use rights, forced relocation, lack of compensation and legal redress. Chatwin intended to valorize the nomadic lifestyle, but with no mention of the often-bitter realities of being conscripted to the global market economy, his romanticism is contrived; as Žizek intones, "What lurks behind the compassion for the poor is their vampiric exploitation".⁶⁸ The poor and the indigenous can "mediate" life-changing experiences, but only when the Western subject has the ability to "vanish" and go back to their accustomed comforts.

A number of travel narratives emerged in the 1990s in conjunction with the steady growth of backpacking tourism. Bill Bryson published *Neither Here Nor There* (1992) and *Notes From a Small Island* (1996), humorous and highly engaging narratives about his experience as a more traditionally-minded tourist in Europe and the UK, a sort of modern—and much more politically correct—foil for Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*. Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996), the story of Christopher McCandless, who gave away all his belongings and struck out into the Alaskan wilderness, achieved immense popularity within mainstream US culture and backpacking tourism. Written as a journalistic account interspersed with fragments from McCandless' diary and letters, the narrative embellishes upon the now-familiar drive for "experience". As McCandless writes in his journal, "The very basic core of a man's [sic] living spirit is his passion for

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Peter Phipps, "Tourists, Terrorists, Death and Value", in *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics*, ed. R. Kaur and J. Hutnyk (London: Zed Books, 1999), 82.

⁶⁷ Chatwin, *The Songlines*, 18.

⁶⁸ Žizek, "Avatar: Return of the natives".

adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon”.⁶⁹ While McCandless’ fate, death by poisoning or malnutrition in the wilderness, is rarely pursued, his injunction for new experiences and “adventure” was easily appropriated by backpacking culture.

One of the first novels to deal with backpacking tourism is Alex Garland’s *The Beach* (1996), a satirical novel about a British backpacker in Thailand whose trip pushes beyond the common backpacking trip until it goes terribly awry. In a Bangkok hostel, Richard’s suicidal neighbor bequeaths him a map to a secret island where a community of “travelers” has sought seclusion from the tourist hordes. Setting out with a French couple, the company survives an encounter with armed Thai guards of a marijuana plantation before arriving at the hidden lagoon where they stake a place in the community. The pressures of maintaining the island’s secrecy, however, eventually drives the community to internecine, *Lord of the Flies* (1954) -style violence, and Richard and his friends barely escape with their lives. The novel consciously engages the well-trying theme of madness overtaking the Westerner beyond the frontier of “civilization”. From frequent allusions to *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and the Vietnam War, to the rather heavy-handed uttering of Kurtz’s “the horror” (*Heart of Darkness*, 1899) at the novel’s end, Thailand is the wild Other, a playground for adventurous drama; as Richard says, “Thailand’s an exotic country with drugs and AIDS and a bit of danger”.⁷⁰

Thailand is imagined as part of the undifferentiated antithesis to Western modernity, but genuine adventure lies beyond the pale of mass tourism—which Richard and the other members of the beach community fiercely disavow. In a reflection of backpacking discourse and identity construction, Richard and the French couple desire a space uncontaminated by tourism, somewhere that, unlike most Thai islands, has yet to be “spoiled”.⁷¹ The unspoiled, though, is less defined by the absence of Western tourists than by the absence of anyone altogether, including Thais. The locals occupy at best a perfunctory role, presenting an annoying but easily overcome obstacle in Bangkok or, on the island, manifesting as an exotic danger that enriches the adventure.

⁶⁹ Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (Anchor, 2009), 59.

⁷⁰ Alex Garland, *The Beach* (New York: Riverband Books, 1997), 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

In the novel (and the film, 2000), “unspoilt” signifies virgin, easily colonized territory that can be requisitioned to the Western subject’s purposes. Richard and the other members of the beach community express no interest in Thai culture or locality, and have instead sought the beach for its remove from human settlement as a whole; one community member even admits the beach “isn’t really Thailand, considering there’s no Thais”.⁷² The vision of the beach instead conforms to a colonial myth, vital to the expansion of myriad settlement projects on multiple continents, which perceives land as uninhabited and therefore claimable. Yet the reason the island is technically uninhabited—the marijuana plantation is, obviously, illegal—is that it is part of a nationally protected nature reserve. The occupation of the beach is thus an actual colonization, wherein Western nationals repeat a time-honored prerogative to designate land as empty and establish habitation. And although the members of the beach community claim to be escaping the ravenous maw of mass tourism, they are instead its vanguard; the only difference between their miniature “beach resort” for people “trying to get away from beach resorts”⁷³ and that of other tourists is that theirs is less crowded and harder to find. The endeavor is, ultimately, the same: to engage in recreation in an exotic locale.

Gregory David Roberts’ *Shantaram* (2003), a 933-page novel about an Australian convict who escapes to Mumbai, is thoroughly embedded in the “unofficial canon of backpacker books”.⁷⁴ Based in varying parts on the author’s life, the novel’s narrator and protagonist, Lin, escapes over the wall of an Australian prison, where just like Roberts he was imprisoned for committing bank robberies to fund a heroin addiction. He arrives on the lam in Bombay, where through the acquaintance of a tour guide named Prabaker, a Swiss woman named Karla, and the eventual patronage of a mafia leader named Khader Khan, Lin aspires to full immersion in Bombay life. He learns the local languages, adopts various customs of different classes, and makes friends in the slum, the expat bar, and Bollywood film sets; by the novel’s end he considers himself a local. In one encounter, a cab driver swears at Lin in Hindi, who responds in fluent Marathi: “I’m white on the

⁷² Ibid, 126.

⁷³ Ibid, 98.

⁷⁴ Tim Martin, “‘The Mountain Shadow’, by Gregory David Roberts – review”, *The Financial Times*, 9 October 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/57f4dfe6-6915-11e5-a57f-21b88f7d973f.html>.

outside, brother, but full Hindustani on the inside... Why don't you look for some real tourists, and leave poor Indian fuckers like me alone, *na?*”⁷⁵ That he is publicly recognized as a naturalized citizen of Bombay is of fundamental importance to Lin, and he continually attests to his assimilation with the city's locals. In the ultimate affirmation, Lin receives a platonic hug from an Indian woman: “I could make myself understood in Marathi, Hindi, and Urdu; I could sit with gangsters, slum-dwellers, or Bollywood actors... but few things made me feel as accepted, in all the Indian worlds of Bombay, as Kavita Singh's fond embrace”.⁷⁶ In a time-honored symbolic gesture, the white man's acceptance within an indigenous group is brokered through the physical affection of a local, non-white woman.

In truth, however, Lin is ingratiated to “all the Indian worlds of Bombay” by virtue of his European heritage, able to traverse class and caste on account of his white skin. Although colonial administrations have long since disintegrated, the postcolonial international regime still heavily favors individuals of European descent in both the legal and social spheres. While his passport is false, Lin's New Zealand documentation gains him both easy entrance into India and a comfortable residence in the first guesthouse at which he arrives. On the street, though, Lin acknowledges he is identified simply as “a white foreigner—a man most... took to be European”.⁷⁷ As a Westerner and native English speaker, Lin is recognized as a descendant of the Sahibs, with all the attending privileges. When he enters Prabaker's village, he is received with “frank, stupefying, goggle-eyed amazement”,⁷⁸ and is subsequently fawned over. In the slum, residents are “very protective” of Lin, selective of whom they permit to visit him.⁷⁹ And in the mafia, Lin's presence is a status symbol: “I was the only gora in the Salman council. I was *their* foreigner”.⁸⁰ As a Western man, he is able to move with relative ease and safety through each of these environments. While at one point in the novel he is incarcerated, it was as a result of the extrajudicial maneuverings of a politically powerful brothel owner, a European herself; when he is bailed out on Khader's dollar, a friend assures him that

⁷⁵ Gregory David Roberts, *Shantaram* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003), 875.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 881.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 389.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 116.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 245.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 874.

“You got a powerful friend there, Lin. Nobody fucks with Khader Khan in Bombay”.⁸¹

Lin’s rapport across the Bombay social spectrum, from the poorest to the wealthiest, is on the simple account of his whiteness: Lin himself says that “being foreign, being British, or looking and sounding British was enough to win hearts and minds”.⁸²

Bombay is availed as Lin’s playground, the whole of India ready to receive him. In contrast to the dull, unexotic Western countries where he is but one among many like him, in India Lin stands out, becomes exceptional. Particularly as an escaped convict, he is offered a shot at redemption, and he speaks often of expiating the crimes he committed in Australia with his good deeds in India. During a six-month stay in Prabaker’s village, Lin reflects that “I was given a chance to reinvent myself... and become the man I’d always wanted to be”.⁸³ *Shantaram* seems to have curried such favor within the backpacking community because of the accessibility of the playground; with the novel written in the tone of autobiography, it is as if Roberts is saying: India will accept *you*, too. Lin’s convict status is eminently approachable: just substitute convict for anyone fleeing something in their home country, whether it be a romance gone awry, family troubles, or just the drudgery of everyday life. India—or any other formerly colonized destination—is an exotic and exciting playground where the Western subject can find easy acceptance and existentially reinvent themselves.

The most popular travel narrative of recent decades is Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything* (2006). After her divorce, the author spends four months each in Italy, India, and Indonesia to restore her sense of self and find the balance between “enjoyment” and “transcendence”,⁸⁴ to “thoroughly explore one aspect of myself set against the backdrop of each country, in a place that has traditionally done that one thing very well”.⁸⁵ She eats pasta in Rome, prays at an ashram in India, and meets a silver-haired Brazilian lover in Bali. While the gastronomic and spiritual stereotypes of the first two countries are rather widely accepted, Gilbert is assured of finding their balance in Bali after, on a weeklong writing trip sponsored by a tourism

⁸¹ Ibid, 441.

⁸² Ibid, 874.

⁸³ Ibid, 136.

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat Pray Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 36.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 37.

magazine, she meets a “medicine man” who reads her palm and forecasts her return to the Indonesian island. “As for how to balance the urge for pleasure against the longing for devotion... it seemed to me, just from my short stay in Bali, that I maybe could learn this from the Balinese. Maybe even from the medicine man himself”.⁸⁶

The formerly colonized world is unremittingly the theatre of self-discovery on Gilbert’s quest to “find herself”, and it is grossly simplified and exoticized. In seizing upon certain stylized attributes of fabulously diverse countries, Gilbert paints a shallow topography of essentialism, too readily flirting with effacement of the nuance and dimension of each destination. While she later admits that Bali is more complicated than a mere paradise, her attempted ethnography does not inhibit her use of such bizarre epithets as “trippy Balinese medicine woman” when describing someone she befriends.⁸⁷ When such various spiritual advisors are not bestowing her with wisdom, the very land itself seems to exist for Gilbert’s actualization: “I don’t know what any of these extraordinary equatorial flowers are called, so I made up names for them. And why not? It’s my Eden, is it not?”⁸⁸ Underpinning the entire narrative is an almost myopic disregard of the prodigal fortune that afforded a year-long journey of self-discovery (her travels were financed by her publisher’s purchase of the memoir before she had written it) and startlingly scant reflection is given to such privileges as her USA passport. Her solipsism is so acute that, in one instance where she is brought face-to-face with others’ inability to travel, she nearly usurps the feeling; when an Indonesian friend worries that he will never again get the opportunity to travel to New York, Gilbert felt “his longing for New York so deeply that for a moment I mistook it for my own. His homesickness infects me so completely that I forget for an instant that I am actually free to go back to Manhattan someday, though he is not”.⁸⁹ Fortunately, a “your mother” joke breaks the tension and spares her further rumination on unequal visa regulations.

Eat, Pray, Love is a monolith in contemporary tourist discourse. The memoir spent well over two hundred weeks on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list,⁹⁰ was

⁸⁶ Ibid, 36.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 324.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 238.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 306.

⁹⁰ “Paperback Nonfiction”, *The New York Times*, 28 August 2010, accessed 26 January 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/best-sellers-books/2011-03-20/paperback-nonfiction/list.html>.

featured twice on Oprah, was made into a major motion picture in 2010 starring Julia Roberts, and is one of only forty-six books on the online aggregator Goodreads to have accrued more than a million ratings.⁹¹ Its contribution to the postcolonial playground is enormous, in both proffering the formerly colonized world's peoples and places as aides in negotiating personal crises and in utterly naturalizing the presence and actions of a Western subject within them.

The “Want an adventure/have a problem? Go abroad” matrix is now pervasive, depicting the formerly colonized world as a ready-at-hand playground in which to recreate and find one's self. In a 2014 article for *The Atlantic*, Amanda Machado declares that “traveling to developing countries should be a necessary rite of passage for every young American who has the means”.⁹² Drawing on her month-long trip to Ecuador and a semester abroad in Cape Town, Machado expresses amazement in finding that the luxuries Western modernity affords in the United States did not outweigh the social bonhomie enjoyed in formerly colonized countries, where locals “preferred living with the challenges they faced” rather than endure the West's spiritual vacuity. To educate fellow Americans and help them make “important life decisions”, Machado advocates that young people visit the non-Western world for a “genuine travel experience”.⁹³

In *The Atlantic*, the Other remains a potent site of self-discovery, reflecting in twenty-first century terms Tzvetan Todorov's observation that the age of European exploration was when Europe's identity was firmly constituted by prolonged encounters with cultural contrast.⁹⁴ Through a period of separation, young Westerners traveling in the formerly colonized world are taught to appreciate what they have back home. Casting this trial as a “rite of passage” recalls Victor Turner's model, wherein travel represents a liminal period when a young person can suspend their Western-ness; upon their return home, they are reincorporated into society, reconvened in their identity as Western subjects.⁹⁵ Zizek's restorative vitality trope is even more evident: Machado speaks of mentoring students on a three-week trip to Nicaragua, where they “carried wood on their

⁹¹ “One million ratings!” *Goodreads*, accessed 26 January 2016, <https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/35080>.

⁹² Machado, “Traveling Teaches Students in A Way Schools Can't”.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984).

⁹⁵ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Transaction Publishers, 1995). Originally published in 1967.

backs” like farmers and visited the city dump “where families work sifting through the trash”;⁹⁶ in this fly-by-night mimicry of the “poor”, students acquire a vivifying experience and appreciation for their class standing. As families continue to labor at the city dump, students return back to the United States feeling a renewed appreciation for their Western status.

Machado’s discourse is a popular figuration of backpacking culture. In the following chapter, I look at how backpackers head out into the formerly colonized world to gain a better sense of themselves and their place in the world. Like Machado, backpackers often speak of the renewed sense of self they experience from traveling abroad, after performing association with the hardscrabble life of the “poor”. This “experience” earns them a higher status within Western society—even as it continually subjugates the formerly colonized world.

⁹⁶ Machado, “Traveling Teaches Students in A Way Schools Can’t”.

Chapter II

Backpacking the Playground: “Experience”, Adventure, and Colonial Re-enactment in Tourism

In the search for new tourist destinations, backpackers are often first on the scene. A fixation with the “undeveloped” place backpackers at tourism’s expansionary vanguard: from Peru to India to Myanmar, backpackers lead in the reconstruction of local spaces into tourist playgrounds throughout the formerly colonized world. With Inle Lake in Myanmar, backpackers were the first group of tourists to arrive in significant numbers at Nyaung Shwe and provide the initial demand that lead to the creation of services. After the establishment of sufficient transportation, accommodation, and activities, tourists less willing to endure uncomfortable conditions follow in backpackers’ footsteps, even as the backpackers themselves have moved on to the next “undeveloped” destination. In seeking out spaces untarnished by tourism, backpackers are perhaps the most culpable in the growth of tourist playgrounds.

Their role in this process is almost entirely unpremeditated. Most backpackers would virulently deny any conscious role in undermining local life in their favored destinations, professing instead to seek traveling conditions that are integrated with the local lifestyle. However, a close examination not just of the practices, but the *ideologies* underpinning backpacking culture reveals a relationship with locals that is anything but integrated. Ideations of exploration, adventure and “finding” oneself in the non-Western world are deeply affiliated with colonial-era motifs, while the typical relations between backpackers and locals echo long-entrenched power disparities fostered during the colonial period. More than any other form of tourism, backpacking re-envisions and imitates the era of colonial exploration. While most backpackers are not consciously engaged in any kind of colonial re-enactment, their behavior continues to render the formerly colonized world as a ready-at-hand resource, enfranchising the postcolonial

playground in their individual interactions with locals and, back home, informing contemporary perceptions of the non-Western world.

Before Backpackers: A Brief History of Tourism

Tourism is one of the largest industries in the world: accounting for nearly 10% of global GDP, tourism employs some 1 in 11 people worldwide.⁹⁷ In 2015, 1.2 billion people traveled internationally,⁹⁸ a number poised to continue its exponential growth. In 1950, about 25 million tourists traveled internationally, half as many arrivals as were added last year; by 2030, the number is expected to surpass 1.8 billion people.⁹⁹

While the tourism industry is by no means a Western institution, its contemporary form evolved out of the nineteenth-century Western imperium. A long-standing Western cultural investment in travel, as both a form of pleasure and a means of existential growth, is documented as far back as the Roman Empire when the upper class undertook journeys of leisure,¹⁰⁰ but only in the nineteenth century did pleasure travel become affordable to any but the wealthiest members of society. Following a century of the Grand Tour, Thomas Cook founded the first travel agency in England in 1841, inaugurating the era of “modern travel” by making journeys of leisure affordable for the middle class.¹⁰¹ Within a few decades, tours were offered to many parts of Europe as well as further afield to colonial holdings like Egypt, where luxury cruises were offered up the River Nile. More members of the middle class taking holidays abroad, along with Cook’s and other agencies’ marketing, inculcated travel as a social accolade and marker of status, a symbol which persists with rigor today.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), “Economic Analysis Impact”, accessed 17 January 2016, <http://www.wttc.org/research/economic-research/economic-impact-analysis>.

⁹⁸ World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), “International tourist arrivals up 4% reach a record 1.2 billion in 2015”.

⁹⁹ World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), “UNWTO Tourism Highlights”, June 2015, <http://www.e-unwto.org/doi/book/10.18111/9789284416899>.

¹⁰⁰ John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (Sage, 2011), 5.

¹⁰¹ Reiner Jaakson, “Globalisation and neocolonialist tourism”, in *Tourism and Postcolonialism: Contested Discourses, Identities and Representations*, ed. Michael C. Hall and Hazel Tucker (London: Routledge, 2004), 173.

¹⁰² Urry, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, 5.

Tourism's growth in the nineteenth century was directly facilitated by colonial dispersions of power. While the first tours were to the relative safety of other European countries, colonial holdings provided a "vector" that facilitated the expansion of tourism.¹⁰³ Colonies became sites of recreation, as Great Britain, France and others "were increasingly empires of travel... [providing] playgrounds for the rich or the merely comfortable".¹⁰⁴ With viable transportation and law enforcement infrastructures already in place, European subjects could visit colonial territories with safety and ease—a trend further cultivating the "structure of attitude and reference" described by Said. In tours to Egypt, for instance, Cook's agency "promoted the European idea of a civilising mission and presented his business as fostering prosperity and productivity for the Egyptians", even as the tours "fostered increased economic dependence and the exploitation of local labour".¹⁰⁵ Such paradigmatic relationships between tourist and local are now witnessed the world over, even as overt colonial regimes have been dismantled.

Tourism exploded in the post-World War II period, spurred by new mobility and various countercultural movements. The growth of modern—hereon referred to as "mass"—tourism continued along a similar trajectory, but I want to look at those elements that gave rise to contemporary backpacking tourism. During the 1950s in the United States (and to a lesser extent Europe), hitchhiking as a means of affordable travel surged in popularity, particularly among the younger generation. Hitchhiking was likely the philosophical antecedent to the so-called "hippy trail", an overland route through Asia which developed in the 1960s.¹⁰⁶ Erik Cohen correlates the beginning of backpacking as a "massive movement of youths" with the social and political upheavals of the 1960s,¹⁰⁷ a period in which tens of thousands of young people traveled by land from Western Europe to India and Nepal. An infrastructure servicing the journey developed in the mid-1960s, with bus companies effectively offering non-stop trips such as the line from London to Kathmandu, and along the "overland routes certain places became famous (or infamous)

¹⁰³ Eric Zuelow in Shelley Baranowski et al., "Tourism and Empire", *Journal of Tourism History*, 7:1-2 (2015): 103.

¹⁰⁴ John M. Mackenzie, "Empires of Travel: British Guide Books and Cultural Imperialism in the 19th and 20th Centuries", in *Histories of Tourism: Representation, Identity and Conflict*, ed. John K. Walton (Channel View Publications, 2005), 19.

¹⁰⁵ Waleed Hazbun in Shelley Baranowski et al., "Tourism and Empire", 103.

¹⁰⁶ Hampton, *Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ Erik Cohen, "Backpacking: Diversity and change", *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 1.2 (2003): 105.

in city enclaves comprising cheap hotels and cafes”.¹⁰⁸ Areas like Freak Street in Kathmandu—today an expansive district with a multitude of nightclubs, eateries and inexpensive accommodation—were developed to cater to tourists, offering Westerners familiar food and spaces to congregate.

While many tourists on the hippy trail were content to stick to well-established destinations, Cohen notes the appearance in the 1960s of a tourist archetype he terms the “drifter”, an individual who ventured “away from the beaten track” shunning “any kind of connection with the tourist establishment”.¹⁰⁹ Congregating in small communities away from tourist or local infrastructure, drifters rarely had significant contact with local people. The drifter’s emphasis on frugality, mutable plans and a high degree of mobility created a model for independent travel that backpackers would later try and emulate, a kind of hitchhiker writ global. When Cohen first noted the phenomenon back in the 1960s it was fairly marginal, but by the early 1970s drifting had become the new vogue in youth tourism.

As the 1960s social revolutions sputtered and ended largely in disenchantment, the hippy trail entered a slow decline beginning around 1973 with the OPEC oil crisis and Nepal’s criminalization of cannabis at the behest of Western governments; the overland route to South Asia was effectively closed in 1979 with the Iranian revolution and the Soviet war in Afghanistan.¹¹⁰ A traveling schema was firmly in place, however, and as the price of airline travel fell sharply in the 1980s,¹¹¹ the era of backpacking tourism began.

Sketching a Community: “Travelers”, Enclaves, and Insularity

While little concrete information exists with regard to the flows and numbers of international backpacking tourists—the UN World Tourism Organization does not keep data on backpackers, and only in the past two decades has this mode of tourism received

¹⁰⁸ Hampton, *Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development*, 9.

¹⁰⁹ Erik Cohen, “Nomads from Affluence: Notes on the Phenomenon of Drifter-Tourism”, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 14 (1973): 89.

¹¹⁰ Hampton, *Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development*, 8.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 23.

academic attention¹¹²—backpacking has become a pillar of Western middle-class culture, assuming the gravitas of a modern-day rite of passage.¹¹³

As the name suggests, backpacking refers to tourists who often travel with little more than a single backpack's worth of belongings, enabling both greater mobility and signaling predilection for a style of travel markedly different from that of the "mass" tourist, laden with suitcases and reservations at an upmarket hotel or resort. Backpackers are often loath to be described as "tourists", preferring instead the monikers "traveler" or "backpacker" to avoid being associated with tour buses and resorts.¹¹⁴ Many indeed position themselves in opposition to mass tourists, seeking out the liberty of an unfixed itinerary in an attitude of "spontaneity or 'going with the flow'",¹¹⁵ and attempt to adhere to a tight budget in order to travel for periods that exceed the normal vacation time afforded by most work schedules.¹¹⁶ Most backpackers are younger, between 18-33 years of age, with an estimated one-third of the market composed of current or soon-to-be students;¹¹⁷ they typically represent the best-educated segments of society, are often upwardly mobile, and are usually bent on returning to take a place in their home societies.¹¹⁸ Backpackers commonly travel alone or with a friend or partner, but often form temporary groups in an environment that is "characterized by impromptu social interaction... with unceasing extensive changeover of individuals".¹¹⁹

Backpackers chart the course of global tourism development.¹²⁰ For instance, Thailand, which in 2013 logged the ninth-highest tourist arrivals of any country in the world,¹²¹ was relatively unknown as a tourist destination until it began to receive

¹¹² Ibid, 1.

¹¹³ Greg Richards and Julie Wilson, ed., *The Global Nomad: Motivations and Behaviour of Independent Travellers Worldwide* (Channel View Publications, 2004), 15; Cohen, "Backpacking: Diversity and Change", 102-3; Machado, "Traveling Teaches Students in A Way Schools Can't".

¹¹⁴ Richards and Wilson, *The Global Nomad*, 16.

¹¹⁵ O'Reilly, "From Drifter to Gap Year Tourist", 1001.

¹¹⁶ Sørensen, "Backpacker Ethnography", 851; Hampton, *Backpacking Tourism and Economic Development*, 28.

¹¹⁷ Sørensen, "Backpacker Ethnography", 852; Richards and Wilson, *The Global Nomad*, 14.

¹¹⁸ Sørensen, "Backpacker Ethnography", 852; Hampton, *Backpacking Tourism and Economic Development*, 30.

¹¹⁹ Sørensen, "Backpacker Ethnography", 854.

¹²⁰ Richards and Wilson, *The Global Nomad*, 7.

¹²¹ World Bank, "International tourism, number of arrivals", 2013,

http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.ARVL?order=wbapi_data_value_2013+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=asc.

significant numbers of backpackers in the 1980s.¹²² In part this is because backpackers enjoy greater mobility than mass tourists, but it really owes itself to the backpacking zeitgeist; echoing the drifter ethos, backpackers often profess a desire for spaces “uncontaminated” by tourism.¹²³ As backpacking has become more or less a mainstream trend, that ethos itself is highly debatable; its effect, however, has long been held as paradoxical, resulting in “a ‘frontier ethic’ that constantly seeks to escape the trappings of ‘overdevelopment’, while leaving unacknowledged the travelers’ role in perpetuating that very process”.¹²⁴ Destinations are developed for tourism by backpackers who are themselves fleeing development.

Even though backpackers purport to evade touristic development in their chosen destinations, most are actually integrated within a fairly sheltered backpacking “scene”. This is best witnessed in dealings with local people: while many backpackers profess a fascination with other cultures and a desire for enacting some kind of relationship with the local people in whose country they travel, the vast majority of these “local” relationships are transactional. Locals provide services in accommodation, food, or transportation, and any further relations “are of secondary importance in comparison with those of other backpackers”.¹²⁵ Mark Hampton writes that “interaction or even serious conversation with local inhabitants is typically minimal”,¹²⁶ forgone in favor of establishing connections with other backpackers. While linguistic and cultural barriers may be cited as a reason, the vast reach of English—especially in regions developed for tourism—and the ostensible interest in foreign cultures makes the argument suspect.

Backpacking instead functions as an insulated community, and even has its own cultural spaces. Dopplegangers of mass tourism’s resorts, Cohen names these spaces “enclaves”,¹²⁷ which almost always take the form of inexpensive accommodations called “hostels” or “backpackers”. Within an enclave, a backpacker can expect an atmosphere of social amiability and garrulousness, and depending on the country in which an enclave is located, potentially a suspension of dominant cultural codes stipulating dress or the

¹²² Hampton, *Backpacking Tourism and Economic Development*, 74.

¹²³ Kristin Lozanski, “Independent Travel: Colonialism, Liberalism, & the Self”, *Critical Sociology*, 37.4 (2011): 473.

¹²⁴ L. Palmer in Lozanski, “Independent Travel: Colonialism, Liberalism, & the Self”, 473.

¹²⁵ Cohen, “Backpacking: Diversity and Change”, 98.

¹²⁶ Hampton, *Backpacking Tourism and Economic Development*, 28.

¹²⁷ Cohen, “Backpacking: Diversity and Change”, 98.

ingestion of alcohol or cannabis. As a typical backpacking itinerary plots a route from one enclave to another, “meeting fellow travellers from ‘all over the world’” becomes a “substitute” for interface with the local culture.¹²⁸ In other words, within the backpacking community there is a professed interest to “explore other cultures”, but the emphasis is generally on exploration and not so much on the specific culture.¹²⁹

Nonetheless, there is a pressing need to discuss the terms of such “cultural” engagement. As I discussed in the Introduction, the majority of contemporary backpacker tourists hail from industrialized Western countries or wealthier, Westernized subsets of industrializing countries. While more and more individuals from East Asian and South American countries are engaging in backpacker-style tourism, the practice remains bounded by largely Western motifs and, to no lesser extent, an infrastructure catering to a Western cultural aesthetic.¹³⁰ While there is indeed a backpacking “scene” in Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand, formerly colonized countries in South and Southeast Asia, South America and sub-Saharan Africa are currently the most popular destinations for backpackers.¹³¹ Affordability is part of the enticement, as backpackers from dominant, industrialized economies have much greater buying power. This asymmetry must not go overlooked; as Kaplan put it, tourism “arises out of the economic disasters of other countries that make them ‘affordable’”.¹³² Yet another, equally significant reason backpacking tourists travel in formerly colonized countries is for the more easily engendered sense of adventure: as Elsrud notes, a bus ride in India makes for a better story than one in England or Germany.¹³³ Most backpackers travel in pursuit of adventure, which is typically rendered as “experience”.

¹²⁸ Jana Binder, G. Richards, and J. Wilson, "The Whole Point of Backpacking: Anthropological perspectives on the characteristics of backpacking", *The Global Nomad: Motivations and Behaviour of Independent Travellers Worldwide*, ed. Greg Richards and Julie Wilson (Channel View Publications, 2004), 100.

¹²⁹ Richards and Wilson, *The Global Nomad*, 29.

¹³⁰ See Noy, “This Trip Really Changed Me”, 78-102.

¹³¹ Hampton, *Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development*, 3.

¹³² Muhittin Kaplan in John Hutnyk, "Magical mystery tourism", *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics*, ed. Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk (Zed Books, 1999): 94-137.

¹³³ Elsrud, “Risk Creation in Traveling”, 603.

“Ad-hoc Storytellers”: Road status and adventure narration

Cohen remarks that backpacking is “ideologically loaded”,¹³⁴ both in terms of a vociferously defended stance against mass tourism and in the frequent jockeying for social status amongst other backpackers. While status is negotiated through terms such as who spends the least money and who gets the best “deal”, the most substantial element is a self-positioning toward “experience”, the aggregation of which is a strong motivating factor in backpacking culture;¹³⁵ backpackers typically seek “to represent themselves as somebody who has personally experienced as much as possible”.¹³⁶ Widely remarked upon in academic literature, parodied in novels such as William Sutcliffe’s *Are You Experienced?* (1998), and one of the most frequent topics of conversation in hostel common rooms, “experience” is a kind of social currency within the backpacking community, one of the foremost determiners of what Sørensen calls “road status”:

Road status is obtained in many ways: paying ‘local prices’, getting the best deal, traveling off the beaten track, long-term travel, diseases, dangerous experiences, and more. In total, it comprises hardship, experience, competence, cheap travel, along with the ability to communicate properly.¹³⁷

Individuals who most successfully abide by the backpacker ethos, and who—crucially—are able to communicate their experiences to other backpackers, acquire the highest “road status” and social prominence: they win the backpacker popularity contest. As Sørensen describes, a meritorious experience would be less a summer traveling by train through Europe than six months in India, in which the backpacker gets food poisoning, endures a grueling trek, travels by rail in third class, outwits tourist price-gouging, and faces a mugging or some other manner of physical danger. The narration of these experiences is a central feature in backpacking culture, as it takes the place of other regular social signifiers such as class or education, and is the one reliable topic of

¹³⁴ Cohen, “Backpacking: Diversity and Change”, 100.

¹³⁵ Richards and Wilson, *The Global Nomad*, 25.

¹³⁶ Binder, “The Whole Point of Backpacking”, 106.

¹³⁷ Sørensen, “Backpacker Ethnography”, 856.

conversation in which everyone has something in common.¹³⁸ Noy even describes backpackers as “an ad hoc community of storytellers”, engaged in “an environment in which a tight interconnection between traveling and telling, between undergoing profound out-of-the-ordinary experiences and telling tall tales of these experiences, is creatively pursued”.¹³⁹

Experiences are reified in their telling, much as the backpacking community is “re-established” with each “narration of travel experiences that is passed around”.¹⁴⁰ While it has already been established that tourism is deeply imbricated in the assertion of Western identity, in a community so focused on storytelling, “the traveler is regarded as a narrator of identity”, and the journey itself becomes a “spatial and temporal frame to be filled with identity narratives”.¹⁴¹ Through the acquisition and narration of experiences, backpackers develop a sense of identity that is often described as being unachievable had they remained at home; a trip is routinely “presented in terms of the need to ‘find myself’”.¹⁴² There is widespread agreement among backpackers that their trip fosters profound personal changes, which “are always markedly positive, and are described rhetorically in terms of a significant development and maturation in central personality traits”.¹⁴³ Surviving the attendant challenges and dangers of traveling through India as a Westerner demands resourcefulness, self-confidence, patience and an appreciable understanding of cultural nuance; while the perspicacity of individual backpackers varies greatly, the feeling of actualization after successfully navigating the arduousness of travel—and after collecting the requisite narratable “experiences”—is expressed by virtually all backpackers interviewed in these sociological studies.

This progression toward a stronger sense of self-identity is part of what casts backpacking as a contemporary rite of passage. Yet a typical rite of passage, in addition to facilitating individual evolution, also changes how an individual is perceived by their society; it follows without surprise, then, that backpacking has become a means of acquiring social capital. While most backpackers understandably report feeling “wiser,

¹³⁸ Ibid, 855.

¹³⁹ Noy, “This Trip Really Changed Me”, 81.

¹⁴⁰ Binder, “The Whole Point of Backpacking”, 99.

¹⁴¹ Elsrud, “Risk Creation in Traveling”, 599, 605.

¹⁴² O’Reilly, “From Drifter to Gap Year Tourist”, 1001.

¹⁴³ Noy, “This Trip Really Changed Me”, 86; see also Binder, Desforges, Elsrud, Hampton, O’Reilly, Richards, Sørensen.

more knowledgeable, more socially and emotionally apt, etc., than they were prior to the journey”,¹⁴⁴ extensive travel has become a kind of social talisman, and many backpackers have found that their road status translates into improved social standing once they return home. Successfully narrating a travel experience can lead to employment promotions¹⁴⁵ or facilitate the creation of new friendships.¹⁴⁶ Lozanski argues that, overall, backpackers’ “standards of living will be improved upon their return home because of their accumulation of cultural capital”.¹⁴⁷ The ability to survive in formerly colonized countries maintains a real currency in the industrialized West, a legacy from the colonial era that continues to rely on outdated notions of non-Western countries.



Narrating “experience”: a backpacker takes a selfie in Bangkok, Thailand.

Photo by the author.

¹⁴⁴ Noy, “This Trip Really Changed Me”, 84.

¹⁴⁵ Luke Desforges, “Traveling the world: Identity and travel biography”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 27.4 (2000): 938.

¹⁴⁶ Elsrud, “Risk Creation in Traveling”, 613.

¹⁴⁷ Lozanski, “Independent Travel”, 474.

“Experience”: Colonial echoes, neocolonial orchestrations

Interrogating “experience” in backpacking reveals that, as a concept, it is fundamentally predicated on a reified Other. An experience that bestows significant road status is typically one fraught with hardship, physical challenge, the strange and the dangerous; interactions that almost always must arise in unfamiliar territory. Backpackers, however, are rarely traveling in unpeopled wildernesses, but are navigating urban and rural landscapes that have often been settled for thousands of years by a dense and culturally complex human population. In order to cast travel as “intrepid”, the idiosyncrasies of quotidian life in these countries must present significant difficulty for the backpacker; short of presuming locals to lead lives of constant embattlement, what therefore makes a space challenging is its difference. Difference, moreover, is usually quantified in developmental terms. What makes a train journey through India generative of narratable experience, for example, is the contrast drawn with European train systems: “crowded, frenetic, and unpredictable” versus “orderly, regimented, and efficient”. The less Western a destination is, the more “experiential” traveling within it becomes.

The pursuit of experience, which has become a defining element of backpacking culture, pivots on Otherness and functions as a kind of inscription of Western identity. Otherness has long been “essential in tourism”,¹⁴⁸ and so tourism has sustained Eurocentrism by following, however indirectly, in the footsteps of colonial exploration and conquest. As Lozanski remarks, travel has long been “negotiated through the liberal search for self”.¹⁴⁹ This European search for identity was consolidated in encounters made with non-European peoples;¹⁵⁰ the Other was defined as that which was foreign to Western Europe.¹⁵¹ Tourism picked up where colonialism left off. As Said notes, “to be a European in the Orient *always* involves being a consciousness set apart from, and

¹⁴⁸ Michael C. Hall and Hazel Tucker, eds, *Tourism and Postcolonialism: Contested discourses, identities and representations* (Routledge, 2004), 8.

¹⁴⁹ Lozanski, “Independent Travel”, 468.

¹⁵⁰ See Todorov, *The Conquest of America*.

¹⁵¹ Hall, “The West and the Rest”, 289.

unequal with, its surroundings”.¹⁵² Trips to the non-European world were foregrounded by the extensive corpus of scientific and exploration writings that developed prior to the advent of modern tourism,¹⁵³ so any journey to the Other was mediated by the colonial texts preceding it. Additionally, authors like Rudyard Kipling supplemented accounts of colonial exploration and conquest with fictional tales of adventure, which “were not meant to be merely read as ‘literature’; instead, they were expected to be acted out”.¹⁵⁴ The tourist, following in the footsteps of the explorer—real and fictional—sustained a Eurocentric identity in their interactions with the foreign Other.

Gikandi remarks how, in colonial-era European writing, “the trope of travel generates narratives that are acutely concerned with self-realization in the spaces of the other”.¹⁵⁵ Likewise backpackers, deriving experience from “a (mythologized) image of Otherness”, tell stories about “self-identity” that reflect a peculiarly Western cultural consciousness.¹⁵⁶ During backpackers’ travel in non-Western countries, Cohen and Hampton’s research shows that most spend time building relationships with other backpackers and gravitate toward backpacker enclaves. Lozanski argues that through this behavior, backpackers “identify themselves collectively as a racialized bloc constituted against the Other they seek through their travel”.¹⁵⁷ The “Other”—signified in the myriad cultures of Southeast Asia, India, sub-Saharan Africa, etc.—is a kind of mirror that fosters the articulation of a definite Western self. In real terms, after a day of sightseeing, using local transportation, eating local food and transacting with local people, a backpacker returns to an enclave and the company of other backpackers, spending the evening in a Western cultural space narrating that day’s “experience”.

More than most forms of tourism, backpacking unconsciously engages a colonial imaginary in its interaction with a tourist destination. The backpacking zeitgeist—those ideals adumbrating “experience”—echoes colonial adventure motifs, as seen in the drive for exploration, bids to visit regions where Western culture has a minimal presence, and in the endurance of hardship and danger for personal, almost metaphysical growth. Noy

¹⁵² Said, *Orientalism*, 157.

¹⁵³ See Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*; Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness*.

¹⁵⁴ Noy, “This Trip Really Changed Me”, 95.

¹⁵⁵ Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness*, 8.

¹⁵⁶ Elsrud, “Risk Creation in Traveling”, 606.

¹⁵⁷ Lozanski, “Independent Travel”, 467.

argues that the “adventures, the search for exoticism, authenticity, and ‘virgin’ territory, when amalgamated in the experience of Western backpackers, inevitably entail and evoke imperialist and neocolonial themes”.¹⁵⁸ While it is likely that most backpackers would resist outright comparisons with colonial subjects at the frontier of exploration and conquest, an examination of contemporary backpacking discourse reveals a close allegiance to imperialism. While the neocolonial implications of backpacking manifest physically in greatly varied degrees, on an ideological level backpacking “experiences” are consistently molded as re-enactments of the drama of colonial conquest.

Whether in reading *Kim* (1901) or posting to Matador Network’s #travelstoke hashtag on Instagram, tourists are encouraged to “replicate past versions of travel in their travel practices, as adventurers, explorers and colonisers”.¹⁵⁹ A trip to India is foregrounded by all the other trips a tourist has read about, seen on Instagram and Facebook, heard about from friends. It also must be remembered that as predominantly Western subjects engaged in a community that makes meaning through a constant reiteration of its Western culture, backpackers inherit a hagiographical remembrance of the era of European exploration; they are ensconced in a Western discourse that itself emerged out of centuries of colonization.¹⁶⁰ Backpacking as rite of passage is a modern permutation of a Western discursive trope, that “Kiplingesque quest to test the mettle of one’s independence (whiteness) in the fires of the exotic, or one’s national self in a space other than the nation”.¹⁶¹ “Experience” is still rendered in regions beyond the reach of Western cultural hegemony, which are today known as “undeveloped” countries but the portrayal of which still recalls colonial-era terms of “wildness” and “savagery”.

Postcolonial playground discourse envisages the formerly colonized world in exoticist terms: its subjects are Othered, fetishized, and ultimately dehumanized. As the rigor of travel in the formerly colonized world provides an opportunity for the Western backpacker to gain “experience” and “grow”, the people who populate that landscape fulfill a supplementary role by enriching the journey with unusual flavors and colors.

¹⁵⁸ Noy, “This Trip Really Changed Me”, 93.

¹⁵⁹ Beverly Ann Simmons, “Saying the same old things: A contemporary travel discourse and the popular magazine text”, *Tourism and Postcolonialism: Contested Discourses, Identities and Representations* (London: Routledge, 2004), 53-4.

¹⁶⁰ See Chapter One.

¹⁶¹ Phipps, “Tourists, Terrorists, Death and Value”, 82.

Locals provide services but also a measure of “authenticity”, and a trek through the village offers a brush with people who are perceived to be living outside the trappings of Western modernity. Yet actual interpersonal relations with locals are almost always eclipsed by the prioritization of relations with other backpackers, rendering the villager as more or less another feature of the exotic landscape. Such

travellers cherish the native people as symbols of “authenticity” and derive reassurance from the encounter that such ways of life still exist somewhere in the world; but they do not, generally, relate to the natives as fellow human beings.¹⁶²

Even the briefest interaction with the foreign Other is itself generative of experience and social capital. In one visible confirmation of this phenomenon, backpackers are in “the habit of taking and posting ‘selfies’ with local children—often a white person with arms draped around a dark-skinned brood”.¹⁶³ Posting such a photo on Facebook narrates the experience, while the accumulation of “likes” indicates accrued social status. Envisioning the scenario in reverse—a non-white child taking a selfie with a crowd of Western backpackers, posting it to Facebook on their laptop—invites the absurd, yet also demonstrates the exploitative nature of the photographic exercise; in real terms, it is highly unlikely that children in selfies will ever see themselves online.¹⁶⁴ In these interactions social capital is generated for the backpacker, whether it be through selfies, in the narration of a trek through a village or a visit to an informal settlement. The opportunity for locals to capitalize on such interactions is, however, severely limited. Not only do economic conditions likely preclude personal computers and easy internet access, but it is much less likely for locals from formerly colonized countries to have the passport privilege to travel to Europe and take selfies of their own. That, too, invites absurdity; one struggles to imagine a native of Southeast Asia or Africa taking selfies with children in suburban Europe—or rather, surviving the “experience” without police reprisal.

¹⁶² Erik Cohen, “Primitive and Remote Hill Tribe Trekking in Thailand”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26.1 (1989): 43.

¹⁶³ Stephanie Malia Hom in Baranowski et al., “Tourism and Empire”, 127.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 128.

Exoticism thrives in uneven playing fields, in situations where it is difficult for locals to exoticize “back”. Such exoticization of the local people of a tourist destination obfuscates and idealizes the terms of engagement, which are in fact highly unequal; as Huggan writes, exoticization “masks the inequality of the power relations without which the discourse could not function”.¹⁶⁵ Local people, who already have little choice in who visits their home and how tourists transform the economy, are converted into accessories to the backpacking “experience”. Absent equitable terms of exchange, the relations of dominance established in the colonial era are perpetuated; the very fact that backpackers acquire greater social and economic mobility at home after returning from a trip in the formerly colonized world reveals a perception that they have survived a journey “out among the savages”.

Backpacking tourism reconfigures the formerly colonized world in neocolonial terms: recreation and existential fulfillment have become “resources” that are being expropriated without consent, while local inhabitants mirror the colonial-era labor class, supplying services and enriching an “exotic” experience. The neocolonial application takes concrete form once the process is submitted to an economic evaluation.

The Economic Dimension

Backpacking tourism is often hailed as a boon to local economic development. As backpackers are more deeply insinuated with the local infrastructure, they purchase goods from small and family-owned businesses and sleep in relatively uncommercialized accommodation.¹⁶⁶ In contrast to organized tours, where transportation is arranged and food and accommodation are contained within a select network of purveyors, backpackers’ activities provide greater economic leakage for a local community.¹⁶⁷ And since backpackers remain in a destination longer than mass tourists, several studies have

¹⁶⁵ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 14.

¹⁶⁶ Regina Scheyvens, “Backpacker Tourism and Third World Development”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 29.1 (2002): 152.

¹⁶⁷ Hampton, *Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development*, 134.

shown that they actually spend more money over a prolonged period.¹⁶⁸ While a wider distribution of capital certainly confers benefits to a few, it is vital to interrogate the effect on local communities in broad social terms.

To return to Nyaung Shwe in Myanmar, this once small village with a primarily agrarian economy is now being converted at a frenetic pace into a regional service provider for tourists, replete with multistory hotels, tour operators and restaurants offering international cuisine. Backpackers may have been the primary visitors back when Myanmar officially embraced tourism in 2012, and they still comprise a large number of tourists at Inle Lake, but Nyaung Shwe is already acquiring the appearance of a mainstream destination. The village's new, multistory façade—and the utterly retooled economy—is emblematic of tourism's transformative effect worldwide, and of the glaring lacuna of consent. When I hired a trekking guide and a boat operator in Nyaung Shwe, each was, respectively, a farmer and a fisherman prior to the arrival of tourists. Now, with property values skyrocketing and the price of goods climbing beyond affordability, their trades can no longer furnish them with a healthy standard of living. Like it or not, tourism is the only tenable industry in which they can provide for their families.

Across the world, tourism forces local economies to transition into highly competitive service sectors. While tourism creates wealth, it is vitally important to ask *what kind* of wealth is being created. In historically remote destinations like Ladakh, India, prior subsistence economies are wholly reordered into privatized, import-reliant markets, resulting in previously unknown stratification of social classes.¹⁶⁹ Worldwide, “capitalist development through tourism and tourism-related services” is “the predominant mode of insertion of these communities into the global market economy”.¹⁷⁰ Tourist economies are, moreover, precariously contingent on a foreign injection of capital. After the fall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, for instance, Egyptian GDP fell precipitously with the heavy dip in tourism, devaluing the Egyptian pound and helping

¹⁶⁸ Scheyvens, “Backpacker Tourism and Third World Development”, 153.

¹⁶⁹ See Vladimiro Pellicciardi, “From self-sufficiency to dependence on imported food-grain in Leh District (Ladakh, Indian Trans-Himalaya)”, *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, 2.3 (2013): 109-122.

¹⁷⁰ L. Ferguson, “Tourism, Consumption and Inequality in Central America”, *New Political Economy*, 16.3 (2011): 348.

initiate the worst economic crisis since the 1930s.¹⁷¹ The caprice of politics (Egypt) and fashion (Myanmar) can just as suddenly pour enormous wealth into a community as strip it away. Local economies are thus restructured into imitations of Western capitalist market economies even as they become dependent upon them; as John Frow writes, the “logic of tourism is that of a relentless extension of commodity relations and the consequent inequalities of power between center and periphery, First and Third Worlds, developed and underdeveloped regions, metropolis and countryside”.¹⁷² In a supposedly postcolonial era, former colonies are physically and economically reconfigured into pleasure satellites of former colonial powers.

Tourism is hardly confined to the formerly colonized world—in 2015, nine out of the ten countries logging the most tourist arrivals were all industrialized¹⁷³—but emerging economies are uniquely susceptible to tourism’s transformative power. In a scenario that is familiar to rural towns suddenly inundated by big-spending investors, tourists in formerly colonized countries wield an—at times remarkably—asymmetric buying power. After converting euros, pounds or dollars into rupees, a budget traveler in India, for instance, is capable of sustaining a middle-class standard of living. The lure of such prodigious capital, which greatly exceeds local purchasing capacities and is eminently disposable, ends up structuring local economic development. In real terms, operating a souvenir shop becomes more profitable than working as a metalsmith or cobbler; absent local industries, goods are imported and a formerly self-sufficient community becomes dependent on the global market economy. As tourist services like souvenir shops, restaurants, tour operators, and accommodation displace local economic mainstays, a village or town comes to look less like itself and resemble more a playground for recreational consumption. Local culture is exchanged for a kind of homogeneity, one that imagines difference as a regionally unique souvenir or a few indigenous dishes complimenting a menu’s selection of international cuisine. The shape

¹⁷¹ Kareem Fahim, “Egyptians struggle as wary tourists stay away”, *The New York Times*, 2 April 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/03/world/middleeast/egyptians-struggle-as-wary-tourists-stay-away.html>; Patrick Kingsley, “Egypt ‘suffering worst economic crisis since 1930s’”, *The Guardian*, 16 May 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/16/egypt-worst-economic-crisis-1930s>.

¹⁷² John Frow, “Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia”, *The MIT Press*, 57 (1991): 151.

¹⁷³ World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), “UNWTO Tourism Highlights”, 7.

of the landscape, the accent of the workers may change, but the essential recreational form—souvenirs, restaurants, tours, accommodation—becomes the same, worldwide.

Researchers have been describing this phenomenon for decades. In his analysis of the “socially constructed” ways of seeing in tourism, John Urry remarks that “because of the globalisation of the tourist gaze, all sorts of places (indeed almost everywhere) have come to construct themselves as objects of the tourist gaze; in other words, not only as centres of production or symbols of power, but as sites of pleasure”.¹⁷⁴ Frow notes that “the product sold by the tourism industry, in its most general form, is a commodified relation to the Other”.¹⁷⁵ Both Urry and Frow, however, describe what I have referred to as “mass” tourism; a special distinction must be made for backpacking. Backpackers, as I have noted, have greater mobility than mass tourists and almost always comprise the vanguard of tourist activity in a newfound destination. In other words, the first swell of visitors to Nyaung Shwe were not those arriving in luxury coaches, but those confident in navigating local transportation infrastructure: individuals who would be comfortable lodging in a town without multistory hotels. Backpackers, then, are uniquely culpable in determining which destinations are developed for tourism. The evident irony in Myanmar is that, even as they seek territories at a remove from mass tourism, backpackers are among the most important actors spurring their development as a recreational playground. As Peggy Teo and Sandra Leong remark, “Even as backpackers seek an authentic experience by cutting down on commodification, the very power they wield in determining which places are brought into the tourism economy shows their ability to commodify and set the terms of their relationship with the Other”.¹⁷⁶

Making a playground of the formerly colonized world in real, physical terms is one of the most significant—and scarcely discussed—consequences of the growth of backpacking tourism. As backpacking is already ideologically ensconced in colonial adventure motifs, it is perhaps unsurprising that formerly remote villages with robust local characters are reconstructed to facilitate a Western recreational aesthetic, and that whole urban districts are transformed into playgrounds of holiday consumption proffering the same goods that tourists can access in their home countries. Where once were

¹⁷⁴ Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* 3.0, 124.

¹⁷⁵ Frow, “Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia”, 150.

¹⁷⁶ Teo and Leong, “A Postcolonial Analysis of Backpacking”, 113.

colonies now exist *neo*-colonies, equally invasive if far more subtle. Yet rather than serving the ends of an imperial monarch, locals labor for tourists and the global market, a relationship packaged and sold as economic opportunity and individual prosperity. For any of this to change, backpackers must recognize themselves as foremost within an industry that advances a particular brand of market capitalism to the world's as-of-yet untouched corners, perpetuating a Western developmental model that saw its first implementation during the colonial era.

Chapter III

Blueprints of the Playground: Temporality, Exoticism, and Expropriation in Tourist Guidebooks

“Travel books or guidebooks are about as ‘natural’ a kind of text, as logical in their composition and in their use, as any book one can think of, precisely because of this human tendency to fall back on a text when the uncertainties of travel in strange parts seem to threaten one’s equanimity. Many travelers find themselves saying of an experience in a new country that it wasn’t what they expected, meaning that it wasn’t what a book said it would be.”

– Edward Said¹⁷⁷

Guidebooks occupy a particularly hallowed place in tourism. Despite complex grades of identification—some swear by them, others profess loathing—virtually every tourist is intimately acquainted with guidebooks. Amidst all the brochures, online articles, magazines, films and other forms of contemporary travel iconography, guidebooks may be the primary discursive construct framing the tourist experience. No other text goes so far in prescribing the parameters of interaction in a foreign destination.

In backpacking tourism, the *Lonely Planet* guidebook series has attained a talismanic status. This prominence is hardly lost on researchers,¹⁷⁸ but relatively few studies have undertaken to address what is actually *in* the guides. *Lonely Planet* (LP), like most guidebook series, publishes on a country or regional basis, and valuable studies have been conducted on *LP India*,¹⁷⁹ *LP Cambodia*,¹⁸⁰ and *LP Indonesia*.¹⁸¹ My own

¹⁷⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 93.

¹⁷⁸ See Sørensen, Richards, and Hampton.

¹⁷⁹ See Deborah P. Bhattacharyya, “Mediating India: An Analysis of a Guidebook”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 24.2 (1997): 371-389; Kathleen Epelde, “Travel guidebooks to India: A Century and A Half of Orientalism” (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2004).

study endeavors to address *LP: Southern Africa* (2010). *Rough Guides* (RG), a sister publication, does not hold the same premium as *Lonely Planet*, but in styling itself as less commercial has achieved a certain currency among backpackers desirous of an alternative to the *Lonely Planet* brand, so I also evaluate *RG: South Africa* (2010).

Guidebooks: Eurocentric foundations, hegemonic enactions

Contemporary guidebooks are part of an archive of knowledge with roots in the holidaymaking of imperial subjects. The first guidebooks were published in accompaniment to the organized voyages of the modern tourist industry,¹⁸² and as these organized trips expanded beyond Europe into the territories of the imperium, the array and variety of guidebooks grew accordingly. As I discussed in Chapter Two, early tourism's expansion followed imperial dispersions of power.¹⁸³ The colonies themselves became favored tourist destinations, and tourism helped solidify an imperial power's hold over the colonial territory, in both the active placement of imperial subjects therein and the colony's insinuation with the imperial imaginary as a site of recreational worth.

Guidebooks, inextricable to this process, at times even played an active role in the consolidation of empire. John Murray, a Briton whose reputation was secured in publishing the writings of explorers like David Livingstone, unveiled the first *Handbook to India* in 1859. As the British Empire strove to create a unified Indian territory, however, the various *Handbook* editions—formerly released separately, according to region and state—were incorporated into a single volume, reflecting Britain's ideation of the subcontinent as a single entity.¹⁸⁴ Tourists, so crucial to the formation of an imperial imaginary back home, then came to identify in India a single, British colonial state. The *Handbook to India*, Mackenzie argues, “was more than a guide to travel. It was a

¹⁸⁰ See Matthew Tegelberg, “Tourism, representation, and *Lonely Planet Cambodia*”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13.5 (2010): 491-509.

¹⁸¹ Andrew McGregor, “Dynamic Texts and Tourist Gaze: Death, bones and buffalo”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 27.1 (2000): 27-50.

¹⁸² Sarah Quinlan Cutler, “Tread lightly through this Lonely Planet”, *Managing Ethical Consumption in Tourism*, ed. Clare Weeden and Karla Boluk (Routledge, 2014): 169.

¹⁸³ See Baranowski et al., “Tourism and Empire”.

¹⁸⁴ Mackenzie, “Empires of Travel”, 23.

relentless textualisation of dominion and control, expressed through the places and incidents and forms of both past and present through which that imperial power was supremely expressed".¹⁸⁵ From this early stage, guidebooks exhibited a tendentiousness that framed a tourist's perceptions and experiences.

Guidebooks are a textual stand-in for the role of tourist guide. As the tourist guide works as a kind of interlocutor between local sights and foreign tourists, guidebooks perform the same function, albeit in a cheaper and more portable incarnation. An astute tourist would wonder, however, who it was they were paying to act as guide—what are their credentials? In my case studies, the “guides” are not locals. Of the nine writers contributing to *LP: Southern Africa*, only one of them is a native-born African, and only one other has lived and worked in a southern African country.¹⁸⁶ The proportion is better with *RG: South Africa*, with two of the four writers born in an African country and another having worked in Cape Town. However, all four are white.¹⁸⁷ In other words, the guides for *Lonely Planet* are generally well-financed and experienced tourists, while those for *Rough Guides* are members of a privileged ethnic minority in a racially fraught nation.

My point is not intended as an *ad hominem* assault on the individual writers' integrity, but rather highlights that many guidebooks, no matter how well-intentioned the authors, are writing from a Eurocentric tradition of representing the Other. Southern Africa is a vast, phenomenally diverse composite incorporating hundreds of languages, cultures and practices within its fold; no single author is capable of claiming a local identity in such a *mélange*. The ones chosen to represent these destinations, however, are at a notable remove from most such claims. Even in the case of *Rough Guides*, it is worth bearing in mind that of the 54 million people across eleven different language cultures in the country, only 8% of South Africans identify as white.¹⁸⁸ The activity of collecting information for guidebooks, then, echoes the kind of surveying that was conducted at the

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 26.

¹⁸⁶ Alan Murphy et al., *Southern Africa* (Lonely Planet, 2010), 790-2.

¹⁸⁷ Tony Pinchuck et al., *South Africa* (Rough Guides, 2010), 729.

¹⁸⁸ CIA World Factbook, “South Africa”, accessed 2 May 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sf.html>.

colonial frontier.¹⁸⁹ For the writer of a guidebook, research consists of determining which activities, sights and services are most desirable for the Western reader; the landscape is transformed into what Edward Said calls a “spectacle”, in that “the Orient is *for* the European observer”.¹⁹⁰ In turn, Southern Africa and other tourist destinations become spectacles of recreational consumption, understood and engaged from the standpoint of a peculiarly Western schema.

The argument can be viably raised as to whether one actually desires a local guide in places like Southern Africa. Is it not better to select an individual who is more aligned with the experience of being a tourist, someone who speaks the same language? The question of authorial subjectivity perhaps does more to explain the inclusion of certain content within guidebooks, rather than offer in itself grounds for skepticism. The inherent Eurocentrism of—at least these two—guidebooks is more productively evaluated in terms of how it organizes the touristic experience.

To read a guidebook is to participate in a discourse. Much as guidebooks are *produced* by a particular knowledge paradigm, its readers are *bounded* by that knowledge. As Said describes in the epigraph of this chapter, tourists cleave to guidebook representations of a foreign space in situations of unfamiliarity, to the extent that what is written in the guidebook even supplants what is personally experienced. Similarly, in the period of European exploration predating modern tourism, the writings produced during surveys of a particular region acquired a gravitas that inevitably swayed the perceptions of subsequent ventures.¹⁹¹ The information, recommendations, and structured itineraries in guidebooks can displace the opportunity for firsthand, generative experience, so that a guidebook often becomes a kind of script for the touristic experience, the tourist an actor on a circumscribed stage.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Pratt describes how “discovery in that context “consisted of a gesture of converting local knowledges (discourses) into European national and continental knowledges associated with European forms and relations of power.” In *Imperial Eyes*, 202.

¹⁹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 158.

¹⁹¹ Gikandi comments on the terrific “extent to which the narrative of travel derives its authority from its pre-texts as much as from original observations”, noting the incredible staying power of prior texts; exploration narratives tended to rely heavily on the writings produced from previous sojourns in the colonial frontier. This reliance was so significant that, in many circumstances, prior texts overwrote an experience that may have generated new findings. In *Maps of Englishness*, 97.

¹⁹² During foreign travel, Said observes in *Orientalism* (93), “people, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes.”

Today guidebooks have in many cases displaced the tourist guide or travel agent¹⁹³ and, particularly for backpackers, function as one of the primary sources of knowledge about a tourist destination. In his backpacker ethnography, Anders Sørensen notes that “almost every backpacker carries” a guidebook, usually *Lonely Planet*;¹⁹⁴ Matthew Tegelberg finds that in Cambodia, most visitors “rely upon guidebooks to act as primary sources of cultural mediation”;¹⁹⁵ Andrew McGregor remarks that the two main sources of information about the Indonesian destination of Tana Toraja were “guidebooks and verbal communication with other travelers or friends”.¹⁹⁶ The prevalence of guidebooks within backpacking tourism is so great that, in the novels *Are You Experienced?* (1999) and *The Beach* (1996), *Lonely Planet* is humorously referred to as “The Book”¹⁹⁷ and “the Bible”.¹⁹⁸

More than acting as a significant source of information, however, guidebooks exert an almost hegemonic control of knowledge about a destination. McGregor describes how even as tourists verbally exchanged information,

the sites they discussed were predominantly those which were mentioned by the major guidebooks. Their talk tended to reinforce guidebook sites rather than introduce a stream of previously unknown locations into other travelers' consciousness. Thus, it was the guidebooks that exerted an inordinate amount of power over their experiences.¹⁹⁹

Sørensen expresses a similar finding, writing that during his research, he “frequently heard backpackers argue, when discussing plans, that ‘We can’t go there, it’s not in the book’”.²⁰⁰ In her study of *LP India*, Deborah Bhattacharyya also reports how many tourists refuse to stay at places not listed in the guidebook. Curiously, if they are

¹⁹³ Anette Therkelsen and Anders Sorensen, "Reading the Tourist Guidebook: Tourists' ways of reading and relating to guidebooks", *Journal of Tourism Studies*, 16.1 (2005): 48.

¹⁹⁴ Sørensen, “Backpacker Ethnography”, 858.

¹⁹⁵ Tegelberg, “Tourism, Representation, and *Lonely Planet Cambodia*”, 494.

¹⁹⁶ McGregor, “Dynamic Texts and Tourist Gaze”, 34.

¹⁹⁷ William Sutcliffe, *Are You Experienced?* (Penguin UK, 1998), 27.

¹⁹⁸ Garland, *The Beach*, 189.

¹⁹⁹ McGregor, “Dynamic Texts and Tourist Gaze”, 38.

²⁰⁰ Sørensen, “Backpacker Ethnography”, 859.

confronted with a scenario defying particular information—for instance, dirty sheets in a guesthouse that is described as clean—tourists contrive explanations that validate the guidebook, e.g. that the guesthouse has changed ownership. The guidebook’s authority is often sustained, “even in face of contradictory empirical evidence”.²⁰¹

The high levels of reliance on guidebooks is not merely a matter of the threat to one’s “equanimity” in a foreign place, as Said observes, but is also determined by the social normativities that make backpacking “a nascent imagined community”.²⁰² Backpacking is as much an identity as an ideology,²⁰³ cohering to a set of values that manifest in practice as well as the imagination. The use of guidebooks is both a part of that practice and, more significantly, a crucial instrument in sustaining the imaginary that makes an identity out of “backpacker”. Benedict Anderson describes how printed materials were indispensable to the establishment of a group consciousness. A shared language and notion of a broader, reading collective fostered belonging, such that “fellow readers... connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community”.²⁰⁴ What Anderson calls “print capitalism” uniformly and widely distributed texts, which in their “form and their repeated editions” was reflected in the growth of guidebooks during the 19th and 20th centuries.²⁰⁵ This form remains generally the same, even as guidebook editions are published for e-reader and online platforms.

By reading and engaging the text of a particular guidebook, backpackers are inducted to a kind of community in the awareness that around the world, others are reading the same book, with it planning similar itineraries. Personally, even before embarking on my first backpacking trip years ago, I expressed my intention to *become* a backpacker by purchasing the requisite *Lonely Planet*. Of course, I could choose which guidebook would inform my travels from amongst the long-established *Fodor’s*, *Baedeker*, or *Eyewitness* series. But selecting a guidebook is similar to ingratiating oneself with a social scene, and I wanted to travel with the cool kids. As “owning a copy

²⁰¹ Bhattacharyya, “Mediating India”, 376.

²⁰² O’Reilly, “From Drifter to Gap Year Tourist”, 999.

²⁰³ See “road status” and narration, Chapter Two, pp. 32.

²⁰⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso Books, 2006), 44.

²⁰⁵ Mackenzie, “Empires of Travel”, 21.

of the right guidebook itself is a symbol of being part of the ‘in-group’²⁰⁶ in choosing *Lonely Planet* I elected to join the backpacking community.

Visiting the Past: Temporality, exoticism, and expropriation in *Southern Africa*
Guidebooks

Africa occupies a particularly resonant place in the Western imagination. From *Heart of Darkness* to *King Solomon’s Mines*, *Out of Africa* to *The Lion King*, the continent easily conjures up images of fantastic wildlife, scarcely clothed, dark-skinned people living in huts, and the perils and romance of adventure. In literature and film, Africa has long been a fertile site of European imagination,²⁰⁷ and in visits to the continent tourists often seek to bring the stuff of imagination to life. And yes, some of that exists, but such images do little to describe postcolonial reality. Today, rural to urban migration has created ballooning metropolises, in most countries large fauna is restricted to game parks, civic and entrepreneurial ventures continue to grapple with debilitating legacies of exploitation, and generic references to “Africa” belie a simplistic understanding of the continent’s byzantine complexity. Despite this, the monadic imaginary of colonial-era Africa remains blithely unperturbed.

Guidebooks have done little to disrupt the fantasy. More often they are uniquely culpable in perpetuating the antique vision of Africa as an exotic and storied wonderland ripe for exploration, constructing a pre-modern Other so vastly different from Western modernity as to occupy a separate temporal plane. This abrogation of African coevalness with Western modernity reproduces a system of ideological inequality, in which the other—Africa, Africans—is at the disposal of the Western subject’s recreational prerogatives.

Major guidebooks embrace colonial-era motifs that reconstitute tourists as explorers of a foreign, exotic, but ultimately inferior Other. Particularly in guides to Southern Africa, difference is articulated in temporal terms, reinforcing inequality

²⁰⁶ Hampton, *Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development*, 30.

²⁰⁷ See Hammond and Jablow, *The Africa That Never Was*.

between host and visitor while pandering to an exoticist imaginary. Destinations are expropriated cartographically as the selection of sites in tourist maps plots a tendentious understanding of a destination, one which subsumes locals beneath a topography of colonial fetish and charts the course of tourism-generated economic development. Guidebooks at once ingratiate tourists to a colonial imaginary and avail Southern Africa as a recreational playground.

Temporality is one of the ways a “fundamental ontological distinction between the West and the rest of the world” is made.²⁰⁸ Rooted in the secularization of time, which fixes a trajectory in human history with hunter-gatherers at the beginning of time and Western modernity the naturalized terminus, depictions of temporality continue to sow difference and reify power relations. Johannes Fabian argues that time is one of the critical forms of distinction (Western) subjects make between themselves and the Other.²⁰⁹ He locates a perception of time “states” which discriminate in “such qualifications as preliterate vs. literate, traditional vs. modern... rural vs. urban”;²¹⁰ this typology of time demarcates difference and assigns it hierarchical value, privileging Western temporality and placing the Other on the far side of the temporal divide, as being preliterate, traditional, rural; living, as it were, in a “past time”. “Coevalness”, the term Fabian ascribes to the condition of sharing a common, active temporal space,²¹¹ is reserved for the West and its technological and/or metaphysical associates.

As Fabian wrote on anthropology, his observations are uniquely salient in an industry that thrives on what Graham Huggan calls the “anthropological exotic”;²¹² as tourism commodifies difference, the greater the portrayal of difference, the greater the opportunity for profit. When difference is contrived in temporal terms, inequality flourishes at the already imbalanced juncture of foreign capital and local service sector.

From the very first sentence of *Lonely Planet: Southern Africa* (2010), a typological distinction is made between reader and destination: “Southern Africa’s ambient rhythm swoons visitors into a blissful stupor – change down a gear and immerse

²⁰⁸ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 129.

²⁰⁹ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 28.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*, 23.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, 31.

²¹² Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 34.

yourself in the region’s enchanting, at times otherworldly, offerings”.²¹³ Immediately the reader is aware they are exiting the familiar trappings of Western modernity, entering an alien landscape painted in exoticist language that instantly recalls the imaginary Africa trope. According to *LP*, Africa is musical, magical, bizarre, *slow*—the Western reader must de-accelerate from their rapid, technologized pace in order to achieve that peculiarly African “bliss” (although “stupor” does no one any favors). The opening salvo continues: “Enmeshed in this wilderness is a multitude of ethnic groups, many known for their hospitality and some with direct links to our Stone Age ancestors”.²¹⁴ Despite how “wilderness” connotes a vast, untracked territory inviting exploration, the presence of “ethnic multitudes” offers some hint that the land has been long inhabited—a distinction, of course, never made by the first Europeans laying claim to the continent. The “hospitality” of these peoples promises safe, pliant exploration, along with “ethnic” exoticism—although one might ask, what Western metropolis does not itself host multitudes of “ethnic” groups. Outstanding in this fanciful description of Southern Africa is the relation of its inhabitants to the “Stone Age”; about as far removed from Western modernity, as Other, as possible. Postcolonial playground exploration and adventure motifs find particularly rich expression in the touristic landscape, which abounds in opportunity for adventure among peoples who are still stuck in the “stone age”. The *Lonely Planet* introduction concludes with an injunction: “Southern Africa will fill that part of your heart that yearns for adventure. This is where humanity kicked off – it’s about time you came home”.²¹⁵

Much more than a highlight, ancient human history becomes a kind of preoccupation in *Lonely Planet* that underscores how traveling in Southern Africa is a visit to humanity’s primordial past. A timeline accompanies the guidebook’s “History” chapter, marking the beginning of Southern Africa’s past 3.5 million years ago when, according to the fossil record, hominids first inhabited the area. In 2 million BCE, the advent of *Homo erectus* designated sub-Saharan Africa as “the birthplace of humanity”.²¹⁶ The San enter the timeline in 20,000 BCE, engaging in “artistic pursuits”

²¹³ Murphy et al., *Southern Africa*, 16.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 18.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 32.

such as rock art.²¹⁷ Rock art is indeed “a major highlight for many visitors” to Southern Africa, offering “a tantalizing sliver of mankind’s Stone Age existence”.²¹⁸ The sequence continues to include tension between the Khoikhoi and the San circa 8000 BCE, the emigration of “iron-skilled” Bantu peoples circa 2000 BCE, and the Gokomere’s development of “gold-mining techniques” circa 500 AD before climaxing in the construction of Great Zimbabwe in the 13th century.²¹⁹ Then with Vasco da Gama’s landing in Mozambique in 1498, the following five hundred years of colonial history are punctuated by only one non-European event—the *difaqane*—before rounding off with a resettlement program for the last remaining San in 2006.²²⁰ The inimitable complexity of Southern Africa’s history is pared down to an archaeological discourse of fossils, rock art, and “stone age” peoples, only to give way to the well-documented European conquest of the region. Then, lest the tourist become too enwrapped in contemporary Southern Africa, *Lonely Planet*’s timeline returns to the San, the final vestige of the living past.

The fixation on ancient history asphyxiates African contemporaneity, casting the continent back into a pre-modern temporality. Instead of a balanced repertoire of sites describing continuity with the lived present, local communities are suspended in stasis. This is typical of how the “European imagination” splits “contemporary non-European peoples off from their precolonial, and even their colonial, pasts”; locals are encountered not as “historical agents” with “claims on the present”,²²¹ but as relics, or another feature of the exotic landscape. McGregor notes this effect in his study in Indonesia, where the guidebooks engage in a lively discussion of the Torajan past, “but mention little about their present state, thereby subtly reinforcing the ‘exoticness’ of the Torajans”.²²² And as Huggan describes, in addition to “manufactur[ing] otherness”, exoticization is a discourse which takes hold only in situations of unequal power relations.²²³ In tourism, an exoticized individual becomes less a person and more a “sight”, a recreational diversion. Rendering local communities as exotic historic sights dissolves their stake on the

²¹⁷ Ibid, 33.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 34.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 34-35.

²²⁰ Ibid, 35-37.

²²¹ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 134-135.

²²² McGregor, “Dynamic Texts and Tourist Gaze”, 43.

²²³ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 13.

contemporary period, an ideological weapon that has been used time and again to expropriate indigenous land.

Southern African coevalness is further occluded by how the past five hundred years' history of the region is told almost entirely from the standpoint of European colonization. The historicization of Eurocentrism remains consistent throughout the guidebook, even as *Lonely Planet* delves into specific countries. In the introduction to the "South Africa" chapter, a single paragraph is allotted to the entire country's history before 1836, after which the Great Trek of the Boers, descendants of Dutch settlers, receives detailed attention.²²⁴ Aside from the Boers' conflict with the Zulu, nothing else but two sentences describing the creation of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1923 informs the reader about non-white history, until the ANC starts to resist Apartheid in 1949.²²⁵ There is no mention of how the *difaqane* facilitated Afrikaner settlement, the prophecy of Nongqawuse and the achievements of Moshoeshoe are omitted, the Zulu resistance to the British is never described, and the way in which the San people were hunted like animals by European settlers contributes nothing to the "stone age" narrative. By eliding the nuanced histories of the many "ethnic" groups of South Africa, readers are encouraged to revert to homogenous visions of exotic Africa instead of approaching the region as another complex iteration of global modernity. Little doubt is left that for *Lonely Planet*, the tourist comes to Southern Africa to witness an anthropological and colonial history, adding color and self-referential flavor to a landscape that is otherwise consumed as a space for recreational adventure.

Not all guidebooks are created equal, and *Rough Guides: South Africa* (2010) rises more equitably to the challenge of articulating South Africa's fraught history than does *Lonely Planet*. In the chapter about Cape Town, *Rough Guides* foregrounds the indigenous San and later Khoikhoi as the first inhabitants of the Cape Peninsula and describes the Dutch East India Company's (VOC) settlement in terms of an incursion, not a matter of course. Unheroically described as then the world's biggest corporation "in search of spices, slaves and profit",²²⁶ the VOC's efforts to coerce the "understandably reluctant" Khoikhoi to provide labor failed, after which the importation of slaves from

²²⁴ Murphy et al., *Southern Africa*, 391.

²²⁵ Ibid, 391-393.

²²⁶ Pinchuck et al., *South Africa*, 89.

South and Southeast Asia began and “slavery became the economic backbone of the colony”.²²⁷ This contrasts sharply with *Lonely Planet*’s Cape Town chapter, in which the historical account foregrounds European settlement with the opening sentence “Long before the [VOC]...” before giving a one-sentence account of the San and Khoikhoi.²²⁸ *Lonely Planet* describes the Khoikhoi as having “shunned the Dutch, so the VOC imported slaves” to deal with “the colony’s chronic labour shortage”.²²⁹ The Khoikhoi’s seemingly aberrant aversion to labor almost exonerates the Dutch, for only as a result of their unwillingness to facilitate the VOC’s expansion were the Dutch forced to the expedient of slavery. The Europeans are said to have “exploited” female slaves and Khoikhoi, and that the slaves and Khoikhoi “intermixed” to produce the ancestors of today’s Cape Coloured population (ibid). While *Rough Guides* describes how Khoikhoi society was overcome by expanding colonial settlement in the eighteenth century,²³⁰ *Lonely Planet* has nothing more to say on the matter.

Rough Guides catalogues non-European events with more frequency and detail, discussing slavery and abolition, establishment of the first townships and forced relocations, early resistance to racial discrimination, and how atrocities committed by the Apartheid state created lasting traumas.²³¹ Much more could be done to offset the narrative of a colony-cum-state, but the important result is of a history that reveals Cape Town as a colonial palimpsest, the formation of which comprised many more actors than merely those wielding the bayonet. Disparate tellings of history can deeply affect tourists’ perceptions of a destination; benchmarking Cape Town’s history with primarily European affairs serves to undermine the agency of the majority non-white population, casting the specious impression that Coloureds, Xhosa and other non-whites had a marginal role in making the city what it is today. Despite how popular tourist sites are trafficked (but not staffed) by a predominantly white demographic, Cape Town’s—and South Africa’s—modernity incorporates all of its citizens, and village or township life is contemporaneous with Cape Town’s chic metropole.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Murphy et al., *Southern Africa*, 403.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Pinchuck et al., *South Africa*, 89.

²³¹ Ibid, 89-90.

Mapping the Playground

Cartography has long been recognized as an instrument by which imperial powers exercised control. One of the first priorities of any exploratory mission was to produce a reliable map for the later use of colonial forces, and most of the celebrated (and vilified) explorations were at their heart cartographic ones; Mungo Park, for instance, set out to confirm the existence of the Niger River, and so broach the possibility of British expansion within Africa. The refinement of ever more precise maps became an institution of colonial administrations, and by the end of the nineteenth century European powers had almost entirely filled in the blank spaces formerly occupied by chimeric monsters and sketches of two-headed men with tails. The consolidation of mapmaking conventions revealed the intent to dominate, Huggan writes, in “the reinscription, enclosure and hierarchization of space, which provide an analogue for the acquisition, management and reinforcement of colonial power”.²³² Maps choreographed the routes of conquest, demarcated the sovereign lines of control, and anticipated the necessary infrastructure required to subdue a territory and people.

What is often forgotten is that maps are inherently subjective projections of reality—or rather, project a single reality among many. The cartographic practices of colonial mapmakers reflect a particularly Western construction,²³³ one that dislodges all those realities which are non-Western. The brute force of colonialism did not permit for alternative constructions to exist alongside, and possibly contest, the imperial vision. The discursive hegemony of colonial power ultimately overwrote indigenous associations of locality, effacing pre-colonial topographies by re-naming and re-defining spaces according to a Western epistemology. In other words, maps colonized the spatial imagination, soon becoming the only way a space was imaginatively projected. As J.B. Harley describes, “While the map is never the reality, in such ways it helps to create a

²³² Graham Huggan, “Decolonizing the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and the Cartographic Connection”, *Ariel*, 20.4 (1989): 115.

²³³ *Ibid*, 116.

different reality. Once embedded in the published text the lines on the map acquire an authority that may be hard to dislodge”.²³⁴

Cartographic representations of tourist destinations are commonplace, and in both *Lonely Planet* and *Rough Guides*, maps are integral. While inclusive of the usual urban topography, maps designed for tourism are differentiated from those customarily used for navigation by the designation of choice accommodation, food and sights—say, the best of Cape Town. In a way, guidebooks are textual highlight reels that direct tourists to a particular set of attractions, those selected according to the guidebook writers’ and editorial staffs’ criteria. What constitutes an attraction is itself a construction, determined by the individual writer, the editors, by what they think most appeals to the guidebook’s readership, by a particular way of viewing the world. Guidebooks both orient the “tourist gaze”,²³⁵ and project a tendentious reality that preferences a Western demographic. Again, while one could perhaps debate whether a local’s perspective is indeed preferable, the fundamental issue is that the map *becomes* the destination for the tourist.

Such annotated maps impact tourists and destinations in at least three significant ways. First, the elision of attractions and regions precludes them from becoming a part of the tourist experience and, by extension, the destination’s “reality”. Without cartographic representation, features are out of sight, out of mind. For example, in the *RG: South Africa* chapter on Cape Town, while the Cape Flats and townships are discussed, there are no maps illustrating their infrastructure and attractions, whereas all of the other districts, from the City Bowl to Simon’s Town, are featured in great detail.²³⁶ Few tourists venture into the Cape Flats and townships, certainly, but the absence of even a zoomed-out image with a few of the already-listed attractions—restaurants, homestays—further diminishes the prospect of a tourist’s visit. These regions’ significance in the reality of the tourist destination is diminished, even as they are home to the majority of Cape Town’s residents.

Secondly, while the guidebook’s intention is arguably for the tourist to use the listings as a guideline, not as an absolute framework, as I discussed tourists adhere

²³⁴ J.B. Harley, “Deconstructing the Map”, *Cartographica*, 26.2 (1989): 13.

²³⁵ See Urry, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*.

²³⁶ Pinchuck et al., *South Africa*, 91-135.

closely to guidebooks. In those detailed maps illustrating a particular district, the list of attractions is nowhere near comprehensive. At best, the restaurants listed on the “City Centre” map are a minor smattering of the area’s true offerings.²³⁷ So rather than encouraging exploration in the city center with the aid of a few landmarks, such listings act as parameters for engagement, scripting the tourist’s experience and circumscribing their activities. Especially for backpackers, who in general profess to exploration, the ironic result is that many end up merely retracing a guidebook writer’s steps, living out someone else’s experience.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, guidebooks wield a real economic power. Cartographically representing an attraction almost always plots commercial success as tourists in their multitudes selectively patronize guidebook recommendations, certainly to the expense of other businesses that were not lucky enough to make the listing. The restaurants listed in Cape Town’s city center will receive far more customers than their unlisted competitors, but this effect encompasses villages, towns, entire regions that, through the minor event of a paragraph or page of description in a guidebook, are transformed from locally-trafficked and inhabited spaces into tourist havens. From one perspective, guidebooks can bestow the riches of foreign-generated capital; from another, previously self-sustaining communities are inundated with the transformative power of international tourism.

In addition to annotated maps, *Lonely Planet* features a number of thematized “Itineraries”²³⁸ that reveal a construction of Southern Africa as a playground for recreational consumption. Each itinerary traces a route between major highlights on the map, intended to appeal to a tourist’s particular interest. “A Little Bit of History” follows up on the projection of Africa as a visit to the pre-modern past, as the absence of any history that did not involve hunting, gathering or colonizing guides the tourist along a peculiarly European path. Aside from the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, and two rock art sites where “Southern Africa’s roots are firmly planted”, the remaining six destinations are contingencies of European colonization: visitors can explore “a unique pocket of colonial Africa” in Malawi’s “unspoilt

²³⁷ Ibid, 113.

²³⁸ Murphy et al., *Southern Africa*, 24-31.

Livingstonia”, gaze upon “European extravagance” on Mozambique Island, or rejoin to Cape Town, which is “awash with European history”.²³⁹ With the sole exception of the Apartheid museum, continuity with the living present is again divested from the local African subject, in favor of “stone age” fetish and colonial nostalgia.

Other routes in the “Itineraries” chapter foster a deeper consideration of the African destination. Such “Classic Routes” as “Nature and Fun in the Sun” propose visiting game reserves like Kruger and Mkhaya, and posts natural landmarks like Blyde River Canyon and Tofo.²⁴⁰ “A Southern African Slice” lands tourists in Cape Town, guides them through Stellenbosch wine country then east for whale-watching in Hermanus, before “the thrill of standing at Africa’s southernmost point” at Cape Agulhas.²⁴¹ For the intrepid, there are “Roads Less Traveled” such as “Dusty Roads and Shimmering Waters”; Tourists start in Lusaka with Zambia’s “best nightlife”, proceed through a couple of national parks and “chaotic” Chipata, before making the long leg to Lake Malawi, “which is perfect for swimming, kayaking, or just lazing about after some hard weeks on the road”.²⁴² The list of maps and routes continue, but among the featured stops some common threads appear: Africa’s iconic wildlife, awesome landscapes, the rigorous excitement of an exotic destination. Whereas in European guidebooks cultural hotspots abound, the map of Africa generally reifies an image of natural beauty and rugged infrastructure—and is curiously unpeopled.

Unpeopled landscapes are a prominent colonial trope, and in South Africa can be traced back to the early period of European expansion in the region. Pratt notes how eighteenth-century European naturalists, studying the unique flora of the Western Cape, wrote the landscape “as uninhabited, unpossessed, unhistoricized, unoccupied even by the travelers themselves”.²⁴³ Such depictions, a convention of natural history during the colonial period, aided the construction of an imaginary that deemed colonies ripe for the taking because, after all, no one lived there. The region’s first guidebook, *Castle Line Guide to South Africa* (1893), was published more or less unaltered into the 1960s and retained a similar style. Among the well-catalogued regional attractions, the African

²³⁹ Ibid, 31.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 24.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 26.

²⁴² Ibid, 27.

²⁴³ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 51.

inhabitants were “largely distinguished by their absence. Considering the size and extent of black populations in the region, the *Guide* succeeds in largely leaving them out of account”.²⁴⁴ Much like *Lonely Planet*, in *Castle Line* European associations with the landscape far outweigh those of indigenous Africans. Such European historicization of the landscape “offered legitimacy to white rule in general and British rule in particular”;²⁴⁵ so what, then, is taking place now, in the postcolonial period?

The elision of locals from their own landscape achieves a similar effect as when a particular region is unmapped within a guidebook: while of course there are outliers, most tourists will experience a reduced interaction with locals. This is no particular oversight, for tourists are not visiting Southern Africa in pursuit of a deep insinuation with local life and a significant cultural exchange:²⁴⁶ they come to have fun, to recreate in a massive, exotic playground. The formerly colonized world in particular has become a theatre of Western meaning-making and enjoyment. Landscapes and peoples are expropriated as recreational “resources”, in a kind of parallel to the manner in which imperial nations identified and extracted riches abroad. Instead of requisitioning labor, natural resources and goods, tourism extracts existential fulfillment and fun.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, locals have no choice in whether their community becomes a tourist destination. Once it is in the guidebook, tourists arrive with such significant capital that local trades and industries are overwhelmed, leaving many locals no choice but to enter the tourism trade or perish. Guidebooks map out this course of expropriation, providing a blueprint for recreational enjoyment and making a spectacle out of local inhabitants. Rendering locals as pre-modern creates an Other that is at once exotic and disposable; disparities in wealth and mobility are easier on the conscience when locals are so vastly different from the Western subject, and an unusual aesthetic itself makes for a recreational attraction. The entire process, in other words, would perhaps be more challenging—or at least more troubling—were local inhabitants truly regarded as equals. As it stands, tourism in the formerly colonized world is a highly unequal industry that transforms communities and cultures for the benefit of (typically

²⁴⁴ Mackenzie, “Empires of Travel”, 31.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ See Chapter Two, pp. 30.

Western) tourists' enjoyment. In telling tourists how to make the most out of their trip, guidebooks are a critical medium through which that transformation takes shape.

Chapter IV

Evolution of the Visual Travel Journal:

The “Promontory”, the Aailed Exotic, and Fantasized Assimilation on Instagram

Particularly in the backpacking community, Western tourists approach their developing world destinations through social media platforms. Instagram is one of the world’s largest and fastest-growing; with more than 400 million users, it has outpaced Twitter and become a regular counterpart to Facebook.²⁴⁷ The platform has also become an enormously popular travel accoutrement, both in documenting a user’s trip and in planning one. Brooke Saward, a blogger and Instagrammer with 492k followers (@worldwanderlust), named the platform as one of the biggest influences on her travels: “I see a photo of a place and I instantly want to go there = trip booked, decision made”.²⁴⁸

Saward is one of a growing number of Instagrammers who finance their travels with the platform. Instagram has become a critical marketing tool in tourism, and sponsored by official tourism boards or individual product brands to visit a destination, users with a large following get hired to spread the word. Lauren Bath, another well-established blogger and Instagrammer with 454k followers (@laurenepath), says that “people look at what I’m doing, look at the destinations I’m visiting or the brands that I’m working with, and they aspire to visit those destinations”.²⁴⁹ Instagram is part of what she calls “the dreaming phase”, as would-be tourists look to other users’ images and stories for inspiration in planning their upcoming trips. While other platforms like

²⁴⁷ Kathleen Chaykowski, “Instagram Hits 400 Million Users, Soaring Past Twitter”, *Forbes*, 22 September 2015, accessed 1 June 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kathleenchaykowski/2015/09/22/instagram-hits-400-million-users-soaring-past-twitter/#11059c326cee>.

²⁴⁸ Brooke Saward, “How I Decide Where to Travel Next”, *World of Wanderlust*, accessed 1 June 2016, <http://www.worldofwanderlust.com/how-i-decide-where-to-travel-to-next>.

²⁴⁹ “The influence of Instagram for tourism marketing: Ep #44”, *Holly G*, 27 October 2015, accessed 30 May 2016, <http://gofuturemedia.com/podcast-episodes/influence-of-instagram-for-tourism-marketing>.

Facebook and Pinterest also figure prominently in tourists' decision-making processes, Instagram's marriage of images, words, and networking properties is a uniquely potent form of travel narrative, wherein the motifs that inform Western tourism are particularly identifiable even as the technology itself expands in a novel direction.

In many ways Instagram functions as a travel journal, merely a twenty-first century iteration of a practice as old as writing itself. Travel journals, moreover, enjoy a long history of rapport with the reading public. Throughout European history they have been a vital source of information about the world at large, in which imagery has long played a critical supplementary role. Following each of his three voyages, the journals of Captain James Cook became immediate publishing sensations and stood among the most widely read literature of the late eighteenth century. The journals of his second voyage featured engravings of the paintings made by the on-board artist William Hodges, whose landscapes of South Africa, Easter Island and Tahiti remain iconic visualizations of the colonial frontier before European imperial encroachment. *Tahiti Revisited* (fig. 4.1), with its rugged peaks bathed in golden light, lush vegetation, and women in various states of undress, was among the most alluring for Europeans dressed heavily against a cold climate and conservative culture.



4.1) “Tahiti Revisited”, William Hodges, 1776.²⁵⁰

As a vision of Edenic return, the only thing missing from this paradise was the European subject himself; with the promise of plenitude and sexual availability, however, Tahiti was an available enticement, an achievable state of bliss. Hodges’ painting informed an archetypal vision of earthly paradise, which as Alain de Botton notes in the *The Art of Travel* (2002), continues “to provide a model for subsequent depictions of tropical idylls”, such as the images found in the brochure advertising Botton’s luxury holiday in Belize.²⁵¹

Palm trees and white sand beaches, empty beneath an “azure sky”²⁵² or trodden by a lone, scantily clad and presumably available woman, still comprise the iconography of tropical holiday destinations. Matador Network, one of the largest online travel magazines catering to a predominantly backpacker demographic, maintains an Instagram account with 185k followers (@matadornetwork) and features the photographs of travelers using the hashtag #travelstoke. A recent image from the Maldives shows a single white woman sitting on a boardwalk leading out to huts stilted over a turquoise

²⁵⁰ William Hodges, “Tahiti Revisited”, 1776, Oil on canvas, 98 x 138 cm, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, United Kingdom. Reproduced from Web Gallery of Art, http://www.wga.hu/html_m/h/hodges/tahiti.html (accessed 2 June 2016).

²⁵¹ Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (New York: Vintage International, 2002), 15.

²⁵² *Ibid*, 22.

sea, a place captioned as “heaven on earth!” (fig. 4.2). The woman’s exposed legs and the honeymoon-esque huts at which she is gazing allude to a missing male companion and an undercurrent of sexuality. In a different image taken by Perrin James, an individual user with 77.6k followers (@perrinjames1), a topless woman kicks slowly to the water’s surface in Hawaii, where beyond the shoreline jagged, verdure mountains mark a blurry horizon (fig. 4.3). Again the tropical is connoted as sensual and exotic, the transposition of the viewer a tantalizing possibility.



4.2) *The Maldives*, by @travelerslittletreasures via Matador Network.²⁵³

²⁵³ Traveler’s Little Treasures, @travelerslittletreasures, via Matador Network, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/matadornetwork> (accessed 3 June 2016).



4.3) *Hawaii*, by @perrinjames1.²⁵⁴

Yet what binds these images and Hodges' painting even more than the tropical sublime is the prevailing vacancy of the landscape. With the exception of the sole or few sexualized women, the land is written as free of any local inhabitants. Not only is the destination "for" the observer's aesthetic enjoyment and, at times, titillation in the way Edward Said called the Orient a "spectacle",²⁵⁵ but the landscape appears to be—like the women pictured—for the taking. In Hodges' painting (fig. 4.1), the only significant evidence of Tahitian settlement is a seemingly religious totem under which the nude women bathe, almost goading a Christian mission to strike down the pagan emblem and coerce the locals into moral propriety. While the painting certainly appealed to fantasies of the Edenic sublime, the sparsely forested meadows across the lagoon appear a felicitous location for a future European colonial outpost. In any case, the painting is imagined; local Tahitians, with their developed community infrastructures, could merely be left off the canvas. The same effect in photographs is a more delicate achievement; one can instead imagine the local staff of the Maldives resort waiting patiently for the

²⁵⁴ Perrin James, @perrinjames1, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/perrinjames1> (accessed 3 June 2016).

²⁵⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 158.

photograph (fig. 4.2) to be posed, before continuing down the boardwalk to change out the bedding in the huts. Rather, one struggles to imagine how the locals of the Maldives live themselves, whose primary occupation—in this as well as most images of the archipelago—seems only to be as invisible staffers of the numerous luxury resorts. In the final photograph (fig. 4.3), boxy, nondescript structures stand dimly on the beach, a quiescent reminder of habitation in an island chain that has, since Cook’s third voyage, been a site of covetous European expropriation.

Tropical tourism is but one aspect of the industry. Particularly in vogue, especially among the backpacking community, is an encounter with the awesome power of nature far from the strictures of Western modernity. In this backpackers have a great deal in common with the early nineteenth-century Romantic movement, which itself was influenced by Enlightenment idylls of a pure, unblemished state of nature, as well as European scientific explorations in the eighteenth century. One of the principal figures responsible for articulating the scale of the natural world was Alexander von Humboldt, the Prussian scientist and geographer whose aim, writes Pratt, “was to fuse the specificity of science with the esthetics of the sublime”.²⁵⁶ In the course of his five-year sojourn in Latin America, Humboldt amassed a truly tremendous amount of information cataloguing the natural world, which he wrote as “a dramatic, extraordinary nature, a spectacle capable of overwhelming human knowledge and understanding”.²⁵⁷ The magnificent scale of his records awed the European public as it was published in some thirty installments over two decades, adding scope and depth—and imaginative foundation—to the burgeoning Romantic movement, which saw in nature the metaphysical solution to the ills brought on by industrializing civilization.

²⁵⁶ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 121.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.



4.4) “Alexander von Humboldt and Aimée Bonpland at the foot of Chimborazo Volcano”, Friedrich Georg Weitsch, 1810.²⁵⁸

Notably, Humboldt’s work was concerned exclusively with the natural world, and in the mountain of information collected he made no pretense of ethnography; the Latin America of his travels is, like Hodges’ visions of tropical paradise, largely freed from human habitation and marks of its own civilization. The myriad local interlocutors who helped spirit Humboldt along in his travels go mostly unmentioned. Local guides can be seen, however, in the painting of Humboldt at Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador (fig. 4.4), completed shortly after his return to Europe. Like much of the art depicting Humboldt, he is portrayed as “engulfed and miniaturized” by nature,²⁵⁹ a small and indomitable figure standing fearless against the heroic descriptive task to which he set himself.

²⁵⁸ Friedrich Georg Weitsch, “Alexander von Humboldt and Aimée Bonpland at the foot of Chimborazo Volcano”, 1810, Oil on canvas, 163 x 226 cm, Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten, Berlin. Reproduced from *Picturing the Americas*, <http://picturingtheamericas.org/painting/alexander-von-humboldt-and-aime-bonpland-near-the-chimborazo-volcano> (accessed 4 June 2016).

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

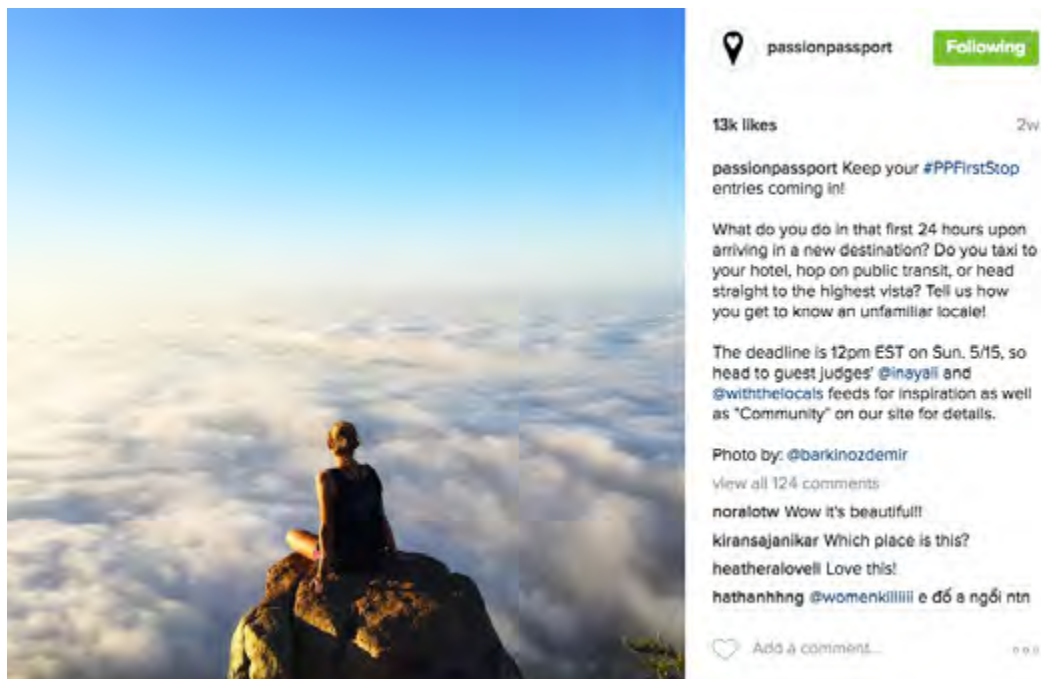


4.5) “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog”, Caspar David Friedrich, 1818.²⁶⁰

A kind of iconography grew out of such depictions in Romantic art, wherein a lone figure stands looking out upon a sweeping expanse of the naturalistic sublime. The most famous of these is Caspar David Friedrich’s 1818 painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (fig. 4.5), showing a man gazing out upon a shrouded, haunting landscape, the wind tousling his hair. This “promontory” motif, in which a solitary subject derives metaphysical solace from their elevated gaze, has become a widespread trope of the backpacking avant-garde; nearly every Instagram account in any way related to travel embraces it. Passion Passport, a travel photo aggregator with 703k followers (@passionpassport), asks what tourists do in their first 24 hours upon arrival in a destination; pictured, a woman who headed “straight to the highest vista” almost perfectly mimics Friedrich’s painting (fig. 4.6). Matador Network features an image of a

²⁶⁰ Caspar David Friedrich, “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog”, 1818, Oil on canvas, 98.4 x 74.8 cm, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany. Reproduced from Arble, http://www.artble.com/artists/caspar_david_friedrich/paintings/wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog (accessed 2 June 2016).

blonde woman at Machu Picchu, hair lifted by the wind, gazing upon one of international tourism's most-photographed scenes (fig. 4.7). Yet what is perhaps even more common is the syncretization of the Humboldtian miniaturization and Friedrich's promontory, where a small, almost anonymous figure occupies an aesthetic vista from which they gaze. A near-majority of the images in Matador Network's account conform to the trope, such as the image of a tiny figure standing at the cliff's verge in a spectacular Norway landscape (fig. 4.8). Another image in Wadi Rum by Samuel Taipale (@eljackson), a prominent Instagrammer with 265k followers whose visit to Jordan was sponsored, depicts a lone woman, arms outstretched and dress gusting in the breeze, wholly dwarfed by the rugged desert landscape and shifting seams of light (fig. 4.9).



4.6) Promontory scene, by @barkinozdemir via Passion Passport.²⁶¹

²⁶¹ Barkin Lacin Ozdemir, @barkinozdemir, via Passion Passport, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/passionpassport> (accessed 1 June 2016).



4.7) Machu Picchu, by @spoart via Matador Network.²⁶²



4.8) Norway, by @beboy_photography via Matador Network.²⁶³

²⁶² Scott Sporleder, @spoart, via Matador Network, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/matadornetwork> (accessed 1 June 2016).

²⁶³ Beboy Photography, @beboy_photography, via Matador Network, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/matadornetwork> (accessed 1 June 2016).



4.9) *Wadi Rum*, by @eljackson.²⁶⁴

The promontory miniature trope, carefully framed so as to exclude any evidence of human habitation, expresses a kind of gaze that Pratt names the “seeing man”, “whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess”.²⁶⁵ As she traces the evolution of the gaze principally through colonial-era travel writing, the seeing man is synonymous with the explorer-adventurer whose travels charted the course of European expansion. From atop a vista, the seeing man would assess a landscape in language exhibiting a “particular interaction between esthetics and ideology”,²⁶⁶ whereas the beauty or sublimity of a scene was reconstituted as territory inviting European conquest and/or settlement. Pratt describes a relationship of “mastery” in such a scene,²⁶⁷ where even if expeditionary forces were not yet mustered to subdue the territory to European hegemony, the ability to render the landscape into words functioned itself as an exercise of power; rare were the Latin American, African, East Asian explorers documenting Europe’s topography, availing European territories as spaces into which their own cultures might expand. Colonization worked in tandem with the agents of natural history, Humboldt merely one of the most gifted and prolific who convened the natural world in a European episteme; the seeing man, too, in describing the natural landscape was able to ideologically possess it.

²⁶⁴ Samuel Taipale, @eljackson, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/eljackson> (accessed 1 June 2016).

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

This gaze manifested in the artwork of the period, cataloguing and bringing home to the European public the successes of the global colonial ventures. In these images the explorer-adventurer is often depicted, like Humbolt (figure 4.4), in a shining spot of light which contrasts sharply against the dark skin of the natives, engaged in some heroic pursuit of knowledge against the backdrop of a magnificent natural expanse. Edward Said argues that:

the picturesqueness of nineteenth-century colonial painting is, despite its ‘realism’, ideological and repressive; it effectively silences the Other, it reconstitutes difference as identity, it rules over and represents domains figured by occupying powers, not by inactive inhabitants.²⁶⁸

Romantic paintings of the natural world reflected this discourse no less than portraits of colonization. A landscape empty of but a solitary, ruminative figure is still made spectacle for the figure, still made empty *for* the subject who enters it. And in most cases, the emptiness is contrived; particularly beyond the European realm, an artist was seldom at such far remove from the locals that they would realistically never enter the canvas. In omitting local inhabitants, their claim to their own territory is weakened, the European observer more readily able to imagine colonization as an act of merely laying claim to empty space. The touristic corollary is that, in seeing so many images of lone figures set against beautiful scenery on Instagram, the backpacker is able to envision themselves embarking on a trip to an empty space and finding their own promontory scenes (and subsequently narrating their experience²⁶⁹ by posting on Instagram). And while the “seeing man” gaze is today equally undertaken by women as well, the inherent privilege and power of the seeing subject has remained unchanged.

The Romantic value for the sublimity of nature is also deeply affiliated with how backpacking tourism envisions travel as a means of restoring vitality. This restoration is accomplished vis-à-vis the natural world, as in the proliferation of Matador Network’s hashtag #travelstoke on images deploying the promontory miniature trope (e.g., fig. 4.8).

²⁶⁸ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 201.

²⁶⁹ See Chapter Two, pp. 31-33.

The “stoke” brought on by travel alludes to a kind of sudden injection of vitality, an immediate suspension of the malaise inherent to any modern Western subject who, prior to traveling, was disenchanted with quotidian life. Yet #travelstoke—this sudden injection of vitality—can be applied in other circumstances, as in the image of a solitary figure in Mexico (fig. 4.10). Here, instead of nature are cobblestone streets, a marigold-yellow “hacienda” with wooden doors, and a woman in shorts wearing a sun hat. Her lowered head, shielding her face, recalls the stereotype of the lazy Mexican, nodding off under a sombrero during afternoon siesta; but racist stereotype or no, the association with *being* Mexican is clear. The tourist pictured performs ingratiation with Mexican identity and lifestyle, using costuming to fantasize assimilation and secure a renewed vitality.



4.10) Mexico, by @thewaytotravel via Matador Network.²⁷⁰

Exchanging typical dress for supposedly local clothing facilitates the tourist’s imagining of an ephemeral identity. This fantasized assimilation may inspire, excite and revitalize the tourist, but when they tire of the limitations imposed upon their assumed identity, they return unencumbered to their privileged status. In Mexico, the tourist

²⁷⁰ thewaytotravel, @thewaytotravel, via Matador Network, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/matadornetwork> (accessed 1 June 2016).

pictured (fig. 4.10) can perform insinuation with stereotyped lower-class Mexican life without encountering any of the genuine challenges of such status; limited opportunity for travel-sufficient income, not to mention the unfavorable visa regulations inflicted on Mexican passport holders, do not become a part of the tourist's reality. In fantasized assimilation, the non-Western Other is rendered as a resource for touristic meaning-making, their very identities availed for temporal use before being easily discarded. Matador's other hashtags on the image imbricate this deployment of the assimilation motif in backpacking discourse: #liveauthentic, #budgettravel, #wanderlust, #explore, #adventure. Again, the postcolonial playground is at hand.

These various motifs—the promontory, the available exotic, the fantasy of assimilation—converge in one of the most-followed accounts on Instagram. At 4.3 million, more than 1% of all Instagram users follow Murad Osmann (@muradosmann), whose images and #followmeto hashtag have created a widely recognized iconography that makes frequent appearances around the web and in print travel magazines. Working with his wife Nataly, Murad photographs her pulling his hand into an exotic scene somewhere around the world, as he follows-her-to a destination in images that regularly accrue more than 200k likes. As they travel around the world, Nataly dons what is regarded as typical regional dress and faces forward, gazing at the scene to which she pulls Murad. The scenes often show a city or historic monument, a sublime natural landscape, or occasionally feature the inhabitants of their chosen destination.



4.11) *New Delhi*, by @muradosmann.²⁷¹

Dressed in regal silks in New Delhi, Nataly pulls Murad into an auto-rickshaw as the driver guides her in like a chauffeur (fig. 4.11). Beyond rendering the locals as disingenuously pliant—no driver gets out of his rickshaw for a passenger—the streets are unnaturally empty in one of the most populous cities in the world. Murad clears it up in the caption: “You wouldn’t believe how many people were actually surrounding us during this shot. The driver was then almost fined by police because we blocked the whole road. Had to persuade them to let him go :)” (fig. 4.11). Beyond the hope that Murad and Nataly fully exculpated the hapless driver with their bribe, what most compels is the need to clear the image of local inhabitants. The Osmanns seemingly went to such trouble in order to again avail the landscape for the (Western, white) observer’s taking. The driver was permitted to remain as a figuration of local submissiveness, an aid to Nataly and Murad’s adventure in a New Delhi ready for the experiencing. A true image of New Delhi would reveal a densely populated, traffic-jammed city, with glaring inequalities in wealth that would contrast sharply with Nataly’s elegant dress. Although she is masquerading as a local, in truth her clothing poses an odd juxtaposition with her

²⁷¹ Murad Osmann, @muradosmann, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/muradosmann> (accessed 1 June 2016).

dented and scratched mode of transportation, again recalling Zizek’s trope of “brief intimate contact with the full-blooded life of the poor”.²⁷² It is as if a costumed rickshaw ride through Delhi’s downtown proffers a restoration of the Osmanns’ vitality before returning to their hotel, where presumably Nataly’s clothing will be somewhat less outlandish.



4.12) Jaipur, by @muradosmann.²⁷³

In a similar scene, Nataly pulls Murad to a temple in “colorful” Jaipur, with three local men in ceremonial dress doing a kind of welcoming dance (fig. 4.12). Nataly wears an elegant sari and the temple, from behind the three local men, is empty and awaiting the Osmanns’ gaze. Here the locals form part of the spectacle, their individual purpose calibrated as an accessory to the maintenance of long-standing fantasies of assimilation in India. From the image, Indians themselves are as exotic as they are eager to welcome white visitors, ushering tourists into their most sacred sites.

Such evident asymmetry of power relations between the Osmanns and local inhabitants is most egregiously displayed in the Philippines, on a visit to the “Palawan

²⁷² Zizek, “Avatar: Return of the natives”.

²⁷³ Osmann, @muradosmann.

Tribes” (fig. 4.13). Although Palawan island is home to at least six different ethnolinguistic groups, the individuals captioned are undifferentiated as exotic “tribesmen”, which is underscored visually by their fine and certainly not everyday wear. Nataly, donning a sarong and—for her Western audience—provocatively topless, pulls Murad into what seems to be a forced welcoming ceremony as the locals stand expressionless in a semicircle. The painfully evident coercion in the photograph, noted in Tagalog by two Filipino users in the comments section (fig. 4.13), calls into question the other instances in which the Osmanns have used locals from around the world in creating their images. In Palawan, the locals are paraded as a subservient, utterly dehumanized spectacle, a figment of rich and pliant exotica posing as ready supplement to a Western tourist’s adventure. The promise of restored vitality is inflected by the vast remove at which the locals are placed from Western modernity, and the assimilation fantasy—as simple as removing one’s clothes—proffers an exhilarating experience. The welcoming ceremony, forced or feigned, further illustrates the accessibility of the formerly colonized world as a theatre for Western subject meaning-making. At the time of this writing, the photograph has been removed from Murad Osmann’s account, but not before accruing 241k likes.



4.13) Palawan, by @muradosmann.²⁷⁴

Such myriad imagery on Instagram, portraying travel as a restorative balm to the tedium of modernity, as a thrilling and meaningful experience from which any Western subject can benefit, masks the regime of privilege through which tourism functions. Pliancy and accessibility are myths. Formerly colonized destinations are available to Western subjects because visa regulations favor their governments; their dollars, euros, or pounds go much further abroad; and white skin, which characterizes the vast majority of tourists, still works as a kind of on-the-ground passport. The international regime allots privilege to Western nationals of European descent, naturalizing a system of historic inequality with such ubiquity that most tourists are blind to it. In a recent post by Brooke Saward, she captions a classic shot outside the airplane window: “Feel more at home here than any place on solid ground sometimes... on to the next adventure! Had a blast in Peru” (fig. 4.14). The casual engagement with airplanes as a kind of home could only arise out of a particular class mobility and visa-easy nationality, much as the expectation of another “adventure” only makes sense to those who have been born into a status in which tourism is easily pursued. The very word “wanderlust”, Saward’s Instagram handle

²⁷⁴ Osmann, @muradosmann.

(@worldwanderlust) and a common expression in contemporary backpacking discourse (see fig. 4.10), is itself a mark of privilege; only those fortunate enough to possess the requisite passport and/or wealth are able to satiate their “lust” for travel. Most of the world’s inhabitants are unable to travel for pleasure or with any kind of frequency. It seems they can, however, help compose an exotic backdrop to the privileged subject’s tourist experience.



4.14) *Feeling at home, by @worldwanderlust.*²⁷⁵

²⁷⁵ Brooke Saward, @worldwanderlust, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/worldwanderlust> (accessed 1 June 2016).

Conclusion

Decolonizing Tourism?



Trekking guides in a village outside Hsipaw, Myanmar. Photo by the author.

Throughout this discussion of contemporary literature, tourist trends, guidebooks, and social media platforms, I have tried to illustrate the discursive paradigm by which Western backpackers encounter the formerly colonized world. What I call the “postcolonial playground” avails the non-Western world as a theatre for recreation and meaning-making, an engagement which renders locals as accessories to an experience, perpetuating colonial-era power dialectics that continue to privilege the Western subject over the individuals in whose homes they travel. Ideologically and in practice, the postcolonial playground has become the touristic heir to the “structure of attitude and reference” outlined by Edward Said, a naturalized disposition of Western tourists seeking their next holiday. In so many words, the formerly colonized world has been re-colonized

by tourists, who are oblivious to the regime of privilege that extorts locals in popular tourist destinations.

But no story is ever so simple as to be all bad. Take a personal example: in the northern Shan state of Myanmar, my partner and I hired a trekking guide to take us through the hills surrounding Hsipaw for a few days. Zozo was energetic, ebullient, nineteen; he fielded our endless questions about his hometown, community, and country with practiced equanimity and genuine cheer. Our route led us through the rural hills' gentle undulations, along patches of maize crisped brown in the aridity of winter, and through plantations of tea, leaves somber green and waxen to the touch. As each village possessed its own dialect, Zozo coached us in a specific greeting, which we offered—and probably mispronounced—to our hosts. At night we congregated with one or two other tour groups in homestays, eating dishes prepared with vegetables from the hosts' back gardens, producing one of the most memorable and outstanding cuisines we had ever tasted.

Working as a guide the past few years, first as an apprentice, then as the leader of such groups as ours, Zozo has excelled in numerous abilities that provide for an economically solvent future. He has nurtured excellent interpersonal skills with people from all over the world, learning to problem solve on the trail for even the grumpiest. He has developed a strong proficiency in English, a critical skill as Myanmar enters a new era of open international relations. He stays fit, he spends time outdoors, and he practices the numerous languages in the hills around Hsipaw. His employer finances his university education in law.



Zozo, left, and apprentice. Photo by the author.

Zozo loves his job, and he is hardly alone. For many like him, tourism has provided enormous opportunity. I have met countless individuals over the years who speak very warmly of their roles in the tourism industry, of the benefits reaped by their families and their own pure enjoyment of the work. Tourism has provided a chance for them to stake out a more dignified standard of living in an international regime that has been stacked against them from birth. What, then, to make of the postcolonial playground?

I can criticize the glaring asymmetries of the tourism industry, how even as Zozo guides clients weekly it will be a long time—if ever—that he gets an opportunity to travel to and hire a guide in one of his clients' countries. I can take note of how, in so many rural regions where tourism is now the economic mainstay, locals were self-sufficient and arguably enjoyed greater autonomy prior to tourists' arrival. I can even recall notions of how colonialism impacts the imagination of the colonized, fostering belief in the

colonizer's myths about themselves.²⁷⁶ But it is too far-fetched to hope that any of this will impact future tourist arrivals.

Damon Galgut makes a similar point. In his quasi-autobiographical novel *In a Strange Room* (2010), a backpacking trip takes him through Malawi. Galgut and his travel companions revel in the decadent lifestyle afforded on the cheap along Lake Malawi's shores, swimming, drinking beer, and consuming the cannabis and fish that locals are only too willing to fetch for them. Although he is South African, for his European companions it is "the real Africa", where "each of them is at the centre of the universe, and at the same time nowhere".²⁷⁷ Like most visions of paradise in literature, before long the façade starts to slip; a walk through the nearby village reveals the locals' severe poverty, and the callousness of Galgut's companions begins to irk him. When an Irish woman relates how she yelled at an old man who did not fold her laundry, Galgut loses his temper, but mostly at himself—for he "is as guilty as any of them, he too is passing through, he too has luck and money, all his self-righteousness will not absolve him".²⁷⁸ As Galgut rightly determines, even a conscientious engagement with the tourism industry is not enough to exonerate him from its unequal structures. Yet Galgut offers no alternative to complicity; in the novel, his character moves on to the next town.

This is the most accurate point of all: even for those of us who realize the rampant iniquities of tourism, we keep traveling. Little can—perhaps even should—be done to halt that. But at this juncture, as difficult as it may seem, we should begin considering means of deconstructing the discursive and structured inequality of the tourism industry. My own research so far does not yield any concrete plan; the postcolonial playground is a diagnosis, and composing a remedy will prove far the more challenging. In any decolonization effort, however, the conversation must begin somewhere, and I am hardly the first to voice concerns.

In a transcribed interview, Bani Amor and India Harris discuss the "ABCs of f****d up travel language". In focusing on postcolonial playground diction, the two seek to unveil the colonial connotations of particular words and describe their place in the

²⁷⁶ See, among other, Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; Gayatri Spivak on "epistemic violence" in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*; Edward Said, *Orientalism*.

²⁷⁷ Damon Galgut, *In A Strange Room* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2010), 75.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

ongoing regime of white privilege in tourism. A is for Authentic, a trope Harris translates as the exotic antithesis of a Western tourist's home country, as one might see in "those outdated primary school textbooks".²⁷⁹ B is for Budget, which Amor translates as "cheap for rich people", relying as it does on exchange rates favoring Western currencies.²⁸⁰ D is for Discovery, a process Harris describes as when "tourists find out about a beach, forest, canyon or sights that locals already knew about, start coming in numbers, and then developers are looking to build resorts", which ultimately ejects locals from their environment.²⁸¹ In this Harris echoes Mary Louise Pratt, who documents how European surveys in the colonial contact zone requisitioned local knowledge and reconvened it within a Western episteme, their "discovery" subsequently effacing local topographies of function and meaning.²⁸² Likewise, language can undercut local belonging; as Amor and Harris try to illustrate, the touristic vernacular continues to displace indigenous narratives in favor of Western transpositions, further edifying colonial-era hierarchies and relations of power.

Binyavanga Wainaina also looks to the mechanics of language in his essay, "How to Write about Africa" (2006). Pinioning the various tropes used to depict the continent in fiction and travel writing, Wainaina mordantly incites authors to "keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular".²⁸³ Calling forth a host of unidimensional, exoticizing, and all-too-common characters, such as "naked warriors", "loyal servants", "corrupt politicians", the "Ancient Wise Man", and "The Starving African", Wainaina sketches the persistent vacuity of Western writing that serves to reinforce the "fantasy"²⁸⁴ of Africa as backward, in need of saving even as it functions as an adventuresome playground. He names the mundane, common struggles of the modern African individual as taboo, along with humor, love, or any mention of African writers or intellectuals.

²⁷⁹ Bani Amor, "How Not to Do Travel Writing: A Glossary (Pt. 1) #dispatch: India Harris", *everywhere all the time*, 28 March 2016, <https://baniamor.com/2016/03/28/how-not-to-do-travel-writing-a-glossary-pt-1-dispatch-india-harris>.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² See Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

²⁸³ Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write About Africa", *Granta*, 19 January 2006, <http://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa>.

²⁸⁴ See Hammond and Jablow, *The Africa That Never Was*.

Instead, he sardonically urges the Western writer, “be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed”.²⁸⁵

Such hermeneutic deconstruction as Wainaina, Amor, and Harris undertake is a fundamental first step in forging an alternative discourse. This is no starry-eyed aspiration; much as the lexicon of racism has been named, shamed, and gradually dismantled, a similar process is taking place in the sphere of travel and tourism. As in the fight against racism, though, the process is so interminably slow as to feel, at times, inert or even hopeless. Often witnessed is a steady dilution of overt invectives into more politically correct, socially palatable terms that veil an unchanged association; thus, in one or two hundred years, “savage” became “primitive”, which in turn became “traditional”. The “traditional” village listed in the guidebook is still meant to bring to mind bare chests and grass skirts, but over time less guidebooks have used the term or even sought out a euphemistic replacement. Highlighting the colonial/racist connotation of such words not only forces a reconsideration of their usage, but demands tourists take stock of their own systems of belief and association. We can take note of small steps: for those places where people indeed do have different customs of dress, far fewer tourists would view them as actually inferior in 2016 than in, say, 1986. Similarly, even as today it feels that the global battle against racism has never reached such a depressing nadir, the consistency with which problems of racism make headlines indicates an unprecedented worldwide engagement with an issue that will undoubtedly continue to afflict humanity for generations. These things do not change slowly. Yet if we look honestly at how rhetoric and ideology has shifted in the past one hundred years, we can find ample cause for optimism.

Fomenting a more egalitarian diction in travel and tourism is thus an imperative, albeit one that will unfold over the course of decades if not centuries. My work on the postcolonial playground reveals that today’s writing about travel and tourism is intimately linked to a genealogy of writings dating back to the first journals produced by European explorers in the fifteenth century. New “regimes of truth”²⁸⁶ cannot take root overnight. Through the same kind of dogged persistence that unsettled, decried, and

²⁸⁵ Wainaina, “How to Write About Africa”.

²⁸⁶ Foucault, “Truth and power”, 48.

ultimately excised twentieth-century racist tropes, contemporary travel and tourism writers will be forced to take stock of their vocabulary and, in the process, confront their own perceptions. We the readers have a great part to play, for particularly as most major media outlets—and of course social media platforms—provide avenues for user feedback, architects of the postcolonial playground must increasingly confront the implications of their handiwork. After all, Murad Osmann did remove his photo of the “Palawan Tribes” (figure 4.14).

An even greater priority in decolonizing travel and tourism, however, is shifting representation. As Ashcroft et al. describe in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), in the postcolonial era the seizure and adaptation of hegemonic channels of communication has become one of the “crucial features of the process of self-assertion and of the ability to reconstruct the world as an unfolding historical process”.²⁸⁷ While robust literatures have developed in numerous postcolonial countries over the past decades, in travel and tourism the canon is still dominated by white and Western producers. Thus when most tourists set out to visit a country, their literary, guidebook and media experiences are almost always informed by other Westerners foreign to the destination; recall how *Lonely Planet: South Africa* is written by non-Africans, that Gregory David Roberts and Elizabeth Gilbert authored the most popular travel-themed books about India, and how the most-followed Instagram accounts are handled by Western tourists of significant privilege. Abena Clarke, author of the blog *Moving Black*, provides a concise summation:

As long as travel media continues the tradition of denying people the opportunity to talk about their own hometowns, and instead pays foreigners to report back on someone else’s country, and no one sees anything wrong with that, it will continue to be a white boy’s club.²⁸⁸

For the postcolonial playground to be unsettled, a canon must be convened that incorporates locals as much as tourists. This implies a shift not just in what tourists read,

²⁸⁷ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 82.

²⁸⁸ Bani Amor, “Travel is Not a White Boy’s Club (And Never Has Been) #dispatch: Moving Black”, *everywhere all the time*, 21 July 2014, <https://baniamor.com/2014/07/21/travel-is-not-a-white-boys-club-and-never-has-been-dispatch-moving-black-2>.

watch, and see; a different canon would represent a new method of encountering the foreign. Rather than relying on the observations and secondhand experiences collected and reproduced within a Western episteme, tourists would attempt to learn about their chosen destinations from the individuals who call it home—and who possibly see the world in a very different way. Rather than the playground, tourists would seek a genuine exchange in their travels, which may challenge their own worldviews in fundamental ways.

At this stage, however, such an objective rings too much of platitude. Structural economic inequalities inhibit the field of exchange, for as long as tourists remain the world's wealthiest subjects there is little to mitigate the extractive nature of visiting, experiencing, and ultimately returning to a high standard of living in a rich country. One of the great lacunae in my study of the postcolonial playground is the economic dimension. As I described in Chapter Two, destinations in the formerly colonized world are forcefully conscripted to the global market economy with the sudden influx of tourist capital. Previously self-sufficient local economies are reconfigured into competitive service sectors, the local landscape transformed into a series of sights and activities to be consumed; this process displaces local residents from their livelihoods and, sometimes, their homes themselves, either through physically being forced to move or in the general dissociation that comes with one's land being suddenly fixed with a price tag. This effect, running rampant in new destinations like Myanmar, requires investigative, case-based study—although positing an alternative configuration reflects more on the global economic order than on the tourism industry.

There remain many years of research, writing, and discussion in which the postcolonial playground critique will hopefully gain momentum. In the interim, though, there is a great deal to be done on an individual level. Conscientious tourists can strive to decolonize their own travel practices. First, this means identifying, abstaining, and speaking up about institutions and behaviors that continue to objectify and dispossess locals. Evidently this means that activities like organized tours through a South African township or a Mumbai slum should be eschewed, but more nuanced is the effort to see people who live in very different circumstances—whether it be a remote village or an informal urban settlement, a style of dress or a cultural conviction—as still human, who

still have a stake in this shared existence that is becoming more connected, more intimate by the day. Next, no matter a tourist's budget, they ought to be thoughtful about how they spend their money, what kind of businesses they support, and what impact each has on the local culture and environment. "Budget" tourists should recognize that, without entirely abandoning the holy act of haggling, they probably do not need that extra fifty cents as much as the proprietor does.

Finally, tourists can engage locals as people, not just as the other end of a business transaction. Recognizing locals as individuals makes it far more difficult to perceive the landscape as just something to consume. For if we are ever to move past colonialism's pale, we must travel with the aspiration that, one day, everyone else can too.



Ali is a dhow captain from the town of Lamu, Kenya. The money he earns from guided tours finances his own passion for sailing; he recently captained a dhow from Lamu to the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar. Photo by the author.

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