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Beyond the production of tourism imaginaries: Student-travellers in Australia and their reception of media representations of their host nation

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ABSTRACT

As with many nations seeking significant tourism income, Australian tourism marketing encourages imaginaries steeped in nostalgic romanticism. Australia is presented to international audiences as a place of grand landscape, filled with unique bounding animals and peopled by simple, happy-go-lucky, pre-modern folk. Defying the realities of a highly urbanized, post-industrial society, this paradisiacal imagery has proven to be highly successful. Reporting the first stage of research evaluating responses of study abroad students to a course in Australian Studies, the findings demonstrate strong correspondence between the imagery of Australia circulated by tourism marketers and the imaginaries inscribed into these student tourists. Travel can disrupt such circles of representation; indeed, the rationale behind student-tourism presents a productive moral imperative to do so.

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Introduction: Students as educational travellers and moral tourists

Taking a lead from Salazar (2010, p. 10), we examine the movement of translocal ideas and discourses in terms of statics and dynamics; of how things change and how they stay the same. In the spotlight are North American visions of Australia and the ways in which these imaginaries *travel* in the minds and bodies (not that they are separable) of young and middle class North Americans. As we will argue, these young people are a particular kind of “moral tourist”; they are all study abroad students carrying with them their sending institutions’ idealised visions of widening their experiences, broadening their minds, through travel. We take no particular issue with these propositions;

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indeed, our experiences as teachers of large numbers of North American students in Australia suggest a need for expanded visions of their host nation, but we do want to move beyond the simple moralising and the posturing that captures so much of the educational discourse (Forsey, Broomhall, & Davis, 2012).

Presented here is an empirical study of a tourist imaginary—a vision, a version, of a nation formed by marketers, filmmakers, television production companies, academics and so on. Under scrutiny is the version of a nation produced largely by the Australian Tourism Commission, a collective that sometimes acts in concert with the Australian film industry (see Beeton, 2008; Frost, 2010); a convergence evident in a number of nations (Månsson, 2011). We show a re-presentation of Australia and Australianness embedded into the imaginations of the young people from big and small screens, an imagination largely untroubled by counter-visions or arguments. As dyed-in-the-wool practice theorists (following Bourdieu, 1977), committed to comprehending the cultured, structured agency practiced by every individual (Forsey, 2010) we know the reproduction of a dominant ideology or imaginary is never perfectly congruent. Individual agents do not have exact and complete recall; they will absorb and interpret and interrupt ideas, they will ignore them, according to their culturally inscribed dispositions and personal proclivities. Nonetheless, there are patterns to the re-presentations, configurations of ideas, which Forsey has been observing and experiencing through more than a decade of teaching Australian Studies at his home university.

Study abroad is a 'quest to prepare the next generation to be global citizens' (Goodman, 2009, p. x), pursuing mutual respect and understanding (Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2011, p. 362), to be both in the world and for it (Slimbach, 2010, p. 8). Such assertions emphasise the requirement that study abroad students become *moral* travelers—simultaneously 'thinking' and 'ethical', as well as 'educated', 'independent of mind', 'aware' and focused on social justice (Butcher, 2003, pp. 7–8; Poon, 1993; Slimbach, 2010). Breen (2012, p. 85) captures this well, citing assertions by Joseph Aoun, the President of Northeastern University in Boston, about study abroad students from his university not just "seeing the world" but "living it". Full immersion in different cultures is Aoun's aim; his students must not be mere academic tourists. As *educational tourist-travelers* (see Gibson, 1998), the students' institutions of origin expect study abroad students to bolster their international awareness, increase their cultural competency and contribute to national competitiveness as a consequence of their overseas experiences (Doyle et al., 2010; Forsey et al., 2012).

Such moral imperatives fit well with an agenda suggested by Salazar (2012, p. 878) in urging tourism scholars to create and operationalize 'new images and discourses that contest and replace tenacious imaginaries'. The study abroad experience offers productive opportunities to document and analyse the distribution of tourism discourses within circuits of tourism and their ensuing practices (Salazar, 2012, p. 867). It also creates an arena in which scholars and educators can test and implement challenges they may wish to pursue to the cultural misunderstandings and entrenched cultural stereotypes so often highlighted by international tourism.

Tourism Imaginaries

We report the first stage of a study aimed at evaluating the response of study abroad and exchange students to the course *Australian Culture: Myths and Realities* taught more or less continuously by Forsey since 2001 at The University of Western Australia to domestic and overseas students. Utilizing Morley's (1974) productive binary highlighting the producer of media messages and those who receive and consume these messages, we reach beyond production. It is not just a study of the ways in which Australia's national image is projected to international audiences through television, film and tourism advertising (Frost, 2010; Greiner, 2001; Riley & Van Doren, 1992; White, 1981); it is a study of the reception of these images, of the imaginaries they produce.

We focus on the initial stages of the study primarily because this is when we are best able to gauge how students imagine their host nation. Having captured these imaginaries as best we could through survey and interview, we discuss and analyse this particular audience reception of the idea of Australianness, enabling us to better appreciate the ideas we are dealing with as teacher and researcher. As we will show, images of Australia presented in often decades-old feature films and tourism advertisements continue to weave their way through the imaginations of the young people we surveyed and

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