Journeys into Authenticity and Adventure: Analysing Media Representations of Backpacker Travel in South America

Amie Matthews

Introduction: The Allure of South America

In November 2007, at the end of my PhD candidature, I travelled to South America.[1] Having spent the preceding four years studying backpacking culture and examining the role of travel in the lives of young people, this was to be a reward of sorts. I envisioned this trip as compensation for my hard work; as a chance to unwind, relax, and experience something, *somewhere*, new. Although I had heard plenty about South America over the course of my research, I had not actually travelled there, ethnographic fieldwork instead being confined to Central and North America, Europe, and Central and South-East Asia.[2] Though my trip was configured as a holiday, as an opportunity to remove myself from the world of analysis and do something practical – to improve my Spanish, to volunteer, to engage in physical activity – I found it harder than expected to extricate my 'traveller self' from my 'researcher self.'[3] As I journeyed through Ecuador and Peru I became intrigued by the seemingly eclectic and sometimes contradictory experiences and practices that were being sought and undertaken by my fellow backpackers. While I was only to tour two countries within the continent, those that I had met had visited or were visiting

Dr Amie Matthews is a lecturer in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology at the University of Western Sydney, where she teaches in sociology and tourism studies.

[2] I spent 10 months undertaking participant observation and interviews with backpackers in these destinations. During this time, a significant number of the travellers I met, and a few of those that I interviewed, made reference to their travels, or plans to travel, in South America.

[3] On the overlap between these roles see Amie Matthews, '"Write" of Passage: Reflecting on the Fieldwork Process and its Contribution to Critically Orientated Tourist Research,' *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, vol. 19 (2012), pp. 1-8.

places further afield. As travellers frequently do,[4] they regaled me with stories of the destinations they had passed through – Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay. Some talked of the pristine wilderness of Patagonia, and the challenge of climbing Cotapaxi; some spoke of the fun and frivolity of Carnivale in Rio, or the wine and outdoor delights of Mendoza. Others recalled overnight homestays on Lake Titicaca, trips into the edges of the Amazon, walking the Inca trail to Machu Picchu, daredevil downhill cycling in Bolivia, and the vibrant nightlife of Buenos Aires. There were stories detailing the best Spanish schools and conversations about volunteering in local communities or wanting to volunteer in order to experience the local culture and 'give something back.' What really fascinated me, however, were the stories of cocaine consumption, of 'week-long benders' in Colombia and other South American hotspots, especially as they were frequently juxtaposed against such altruistic discourses.

I was, of course, not unaware of the hedonistic practices common to the backpacking culture. Many of my research participants had shared stories about illicit drug use, excessive alcohol consumption, and sexually permissive behaviour while travelling, and I had observed much of the same during fieldwork.[5] What stood out in South America, though, was the stark contrast between some of these backpackers' expressed desires to engage in what might be considered 'responsible' travel practices, and at the same time an entirely unproblematic willingness to engage in the local drug market.[6]

Such tensions between ideology and practice can certainly be observed the world over. After all, the ethical minefield of consumption – touristic and otherwise – is home to multiple contradictions and complexities. What struck me about the South American case, however, was the proximity – socio-cultural, temporal, and spatial – of drug use (and cocaine use in particular) to the so-called 'social problems' that these same would-be volunteer tourists

---

[4] See, for example, Laurie Murphy, 'Exploring Social Interactions of Backpackers,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2001), pp. 50-67; and Anders Sørenson, 'Backpacker Ethnography,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 30, no. 4 (2003), pp. 847-867.

[5] Some of these stories are documented in Amie Matthews, 'Living Paradoxically: Understanding the Discourse of Authentic Freedom as it Emerges in the Travel Space,' *Tourism Analysis*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2009), pp. 165-174; and Amie Matthews, 'Backpacking as a Contemporary Rite of Passage: Victor Turner and Youth Travel Practices,' in *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, ed. Graham St John (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), p. 174.

[6] The perceived ethicality of backpacker drug and alcohol consumption is discussed more generally in Clare Speed, 'Are Backpackers Ethical Tourists?,' in *Backpacker Tourism: Concepts and Profiles*, eds Kevin Hannam and Irena Ateljevic (Clevedon, Buffalo, and Toronto: Channel View Publications, 2008), p. 75.

hoped to alleviate. Indeed, if one takes into account the political economy of drug production, particularly cocaine production and distribution, and the significant socio-cultural and environmental impacts it has had – and continues to have – in countries like Colombia,[7] it is not a stretch to consider that the problems these would-be volunteer travellers wished to solve were simultaneously being affected by their own consumer choices.

It is difficult, of course, to ascertain exactly how prevalent traveller drug-use is in South America without further empirical investigation.[8] However, these initial observations raised some significant questions in my own mind regarding the ways in which South America is being imagined by young backpackers or independent travellers. Such questions are especially important given the rapid growth that the South American tourist market has seen in recent years,[9] and the ongoing popularity the region has with independent travellers.[10] Despite such popularity, there appears to be minimal research on how the continent is represented or imagined as a tourist destination, and few studies which examine backpackers' or independent travellers' engagements with South America,[11] at least not in detail.[12]

---

[7] See, for example, William L. Marcy, *The Politics of Cocaine: How U.S. Foreign Policy Has Created a Thriving Drug Industry in Central and South America* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010); and Garry Leech, *Beyond Bogotá: Diary of a Drug War Journalist in Colombia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

[8] The few studies that do exist which examine backpacker and traveller drug-use certainly make some reference to travellers in South America using cocaine and other illicit substances, though they are more generalist in scope. See, for example, Natan Uriely and Yaniv Belhassen, 'Drugs and Risk-taking in Tourism,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2006), pp. 339-359; and Yaniv Belhassen, Carla Almeida Santos, and Natan Uriely, 'Cannabis Usage in Tourism: A Sociological Perspective,' *Leisure Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2007), pp. 303-319.

[9] United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 'Press Release: International Tourism to Reach One Billion in 2012,' *World Tourism Organisation UNWTO* (16 January, 2012), at http://media.unwto.org/en/press-release/2012-01-16/international-tourism-reach-one-billion-2012. Accessed 20/04/2012; United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 'Press Release: International Tourism Maintains Momentum Despite Challenges,' *World Tourism Organisation UNWTO* (30 June, 2011), at http://media.unwto.org/en/press-release/2011-06-30/international-tourism-maintains-momentum-despite-challenges. Accessed 20/04/2012.

[10] While it is difficult to obtain quantifiable data on the popularity of South America in the youth and independent travel markets, ethnographic research within backpacking culture, formal interviews with young backpackers, informal interviews with travel agents and observations in Peru and Ecuador have revealed that the region rates highly with this segment of the travel population.

[11] This is a point also made by Sørenson, 'Backpacker Ethnography,' p. 850.

[12] There are indeed studies that mention backpackers in South America, but this is not their specific focus. See Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, 'Introduction: Backpacking as a Rite of

Subsequently, there have been a number of calls made in recent years for more research to be conducted on backpacking in South and Latin America.[13]

While planned ethnographic research will reveal more about the interplay between the travel imaginary and individual travel behaviours in South America, this article is concerned with unpacking the widely circulating images and discourses that presumably inform travellers' preconceptions about the continent. Specifically, by examining a variety of media commonly utilised by independent travellers and backpackers, this paper explores the ways in which South America and the individual countries it comprises are represented to potential tourists and youth tourists around the world.

To this end, the following section provides an overview of the relationship between tourism and the media, and between media images and the tourist imaginary. The media sources analysed as part of the current research will then be outlined and the results of this analysis will be presented. In particular, emphasis is placed on dominant discourses of authenticity, adventure and risk, and the potential implications of these images and imaginings for independent travellers and the tourism destinations they pass through.

Tourism, the Media and the Imagination
It is by now well established that tourism and the media, as distinct industries and separate domains of experiential consumption, play a significant role in contemporary Western society. Both have developed and changed rapidly over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, acting as forces for and signs of globalisation, shaping and being shaped by various social and cultural conditions along the way. They have both also become increasingly interrelated and thus evermore interdependent.[14]

Passage in Israel,' in *Israeli Backpackers: From Tourism to Rite of Passage*, eds Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 1.

[13] See, for example, Noy and Cohen, 'Backpacking as a Rite of Passage,' p. 21; Phillip Pearce, 'Sustainability Research and Backpacker Studies: Intersections and Mutual Insights,' in *Backpacker Tourism: Concepts and Profiles*, eds Kevin Hannam and Irena Ateljevic (Clevedon, Buffalo, and Toronto: Channel View Publications, 2008), p. 40; and Greg Richards and Julie Wilson, 'Widening Perspectives in Backpacker Research,' in *The Global Nomad*: *Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*, eds Greg Richards and Julie Wilson (Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto, and Sydney: Channel View Publications, 2004), p. 279.

[14] Sue Beeton, Glen Croy, and Warwick Frost, 'Tourism and Media into the 21st Century,' *Tourism, Culture & Communication*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2006), pp. 157-159; David Crouch, Rhona Jackson, and Felix Thompson, 'Introduction: The Media and the Tourist Imagination,' in *The Media and the Tourist Imagination: Converging Cultures*, eds David Crouch, Rhona Jackson, and Felix Thompson (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), p. 1; Philip Long

On the one hand, tourism is undoubtedly influenced by, and even reliant on, the media and the images that it is responsible for circulating. Various forms of media impact traveller motivation, desire, expectation, behaviour, and understanding.[15] They also have a marked influence on destination image, choice, supply and demand.[16] At the same time, the media frequently adopts tourism and travel as its subject matter.[17] Thus, news reports on travel-related events (such as transport strikes, natural disasters, and the rise and fall of the industry) abound, and frequent references to holidays appear in popular cultural sources (such as films, television, music, and literature). In addition, there exists an almost infinite number of sites, blogs and online forums, advertisements and guidebooks dedicated to journeys near and far. On this basis, it is no surprise that tourism has become an increasingly mediated experience.

Indeed, writing on the relationship between backpackers and guidebooks, Tamara Young has recently observed that:

> Travellers come to know about the places, peoples, and cultures of travel destinations in various ways. The relationship between the traveller and the travelled destination is a mediated one … These texts [guidebooks] provide a socially and culturally constructed lens through which travellers come to see and know their travelled and untravelled world.[18]

---

and Mike Robinson, 'Tourism, Popular Culture and the Media,' in *The SAGE Handbook of Tourism Studies*, eds Tazim Jamal and Mike Robinson (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), p. 98.

[15] Jennifer Laing and Geoffrey Crouch, 'Exploring the Role of the Media in Shaping Motivations Behind Frontier Travel Experiences,' *Tourism Analysis*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2009), pp. 187-198; Jess Ponting, 'Projecting Paradise: The Surf Media and the Hermeneutic Circle in Surfing Tourism,' *Tourism Analysis*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2009), pp. 175-185; Tamara Young, 'Framing Experiences of Aboriginal Australia: Guidebooks as Mediators in Backpacker Travel,' *Tourism Analysis*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2009), pp. 155-164.

[16] Lisa Law, Tim Bunnell, and Chin-Ee Ong, 'The Beach, the Gaze and Film Tourism,' *Tourist Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2007), pp. 141-164; Tim Winter, 'Angkor Meets Tomb Raider: Setting the Scene,' *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2002), pp. 323-336; Olivia Jenkins, 'Photography and Travel Brochures: The Circle of Representation,' *Tourism Geographies*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2003), pp. 305-328; Sue Beeton, 'Smiling For The Camera: The Influence of Film Audiences on a Budget Tourism Destination,' *Tourism, Culture & Communication*, vol. 3 (2001), pp. 15-25; Glen Croy, Warwick Frost, and Sue Beeton, 'Introduction: Tourism and Media,' *Tourism Analysis*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2009), pp. 153-154.

[17] Crouch, Jackson, and Thompson, 'The Media and the Tourist Imagination,' pp. 2-3; Long and Robinson, 'Tourism, Popular Culture and the Media,' p. 103.

[18] Young, 'Framing Experiences of Aboriginal Australia,' p. 155.

While Young focuses on the way in which guidebooks, typically purchased once the decision to travel has already been made, "shape, frame, and define a place and its people … influencing the opinions and perceptions of their readers," others have pointed to the role the media can play in creating a desire to travel in the first place, and/or the way in which it can influence tourist behaviour in a destination.[19]

For instance, in her research on backpackers in Australia, Olivia Jenkins demonstrates the significant impact that tourism marketing, in the form of brochures, can have on young travellers' expectations of and behaviours in a destination.[20] Examining firstly the images that are used to promote Australia to backpackers, Jenkins goes on to analyse the activities that backpackers actually engage in while visiting Australia and the subsequent images that they themselves create. In doing so, she identifies a substantial overlap between individual backpackers' photos and between backpacker photos and the marketing materials they were likely exposed to pre-trip. On this basis, she argues that there exists in tourism a circle of representation which directs the tourist gaze and subsequent experience in very specific ways. She explains that this cycle begins with the projection of destination images by the mass media and that these images are then consumed by individuals who are in turn motivated to travel to that destination. The cycle continues, she argues, when in the travel destination those same individuals seek out 'the main attractions or tourist icons seen in the projected images' and subsequently document their own experiences in photos, which are then shared with friends and family at home.[21]

The media that both Young[22] and Jenkins[23] are concerned with can be understood as 'induced' media. That is, as media which are "intended, produced and presented as being concerned specifically with narratives on tourism" and which typically reflect and/or support industry interests.[24] By way of contrast, other researchers have focused on 'organic' media which are less tourism-centric or tourism specific. While the lines between the two categories are undoubtedly blurred, it has been argued that such organic media generally exist "outside of the influence of the tourism industry and its desire to shape our imaginings."[25] These organic media are equally as powerful when

---

[19] Young, 'Framing Experiences of Aboriginal Australia,' p. 157.

[20] Jenkins, 'Photography and Travel Brochures.'

[21] Jenkins, 'Photography and Travel Brochures,' p. 308.

[22] Young, 'Framing Experiences of Aboriginal Australia.'

[23] Jenkins, 'Photography and Travel Brochures.'

[24] Long and Robinson, 'Tourism, Popular Culture and the Media,' p. 103.

[25] Long and Robinson, 'Tourism, Popular Culture and the Media,' p. 107.

it comes to shaping tourist desires, expectations, understandings, and behaviours. In fact, their broader reach means that they may have even greater influence.

For example, in their research on frontier tourism, Jennifer Laing and Geoffrey Crouch identify that a diverse array of media, including literature, film and television, pictures and photographs, magazines and newspapers, can influence individual motivations for, fantasies and mythologies about, and modes of, travel.[26] They argue that these organic media can have a powerful influence over the potential traveller, especially as they are typically consumed over a long period of time, and sometimes an entire lifetime. Similarly, in his study of surf tourism to the Mentawai Islands, Jess Ponting points to the influence that surf media (including surf films, posters, surf magazines, and merchandise), and more broadly the surfing industry, have on surf tourists.[27] Ponting argues that high-profile recognition of the Mentawais and growing normalisation of 'The Boat Trip' (that is, live-aboard surfing charter tours) in surf media have led to rapid tourism development in the archipelago, without "overt branding or destination marketing activities" needing to be carried out.[28] As well as fostering the desire to travel to the Mentawais, Ponting argues that surf media also influence in-destination behaviour, with many surf tourists trying to emulate the surfing poses and displays originally made famous in photographs, posters, and documentaries. Thus he argues that the hermeneutic circle also operates within surf tourism and through a broader range of media than have previously been considered.[29]

It is clear from this that both organic and induced media have the capacity to influence individuals' decisions to travel and to travel in particular ways. They also influence the destinations and activities tourists seek, the meanings they give, and the representations they then make about their experiences. There is, as such, a deeply entrenched dialectic between tourism and media which, according to David Crouch, Rhona Jackson, and Felix Thompson, is facilitated by the imagination.[30] They argue that it is imagination which filters and processes, cognitively and emotionally, media and tourism encounters and consumption practices, and which subsequently operates as a practical and conceptual link between two distinct industries and cultural products.

---

[26] Laing and Crouch, 'Exploring the Role of the Media,' pp. 190-192.
[27] Ponting, 'Projecting Paradise.'
[28] Ponting, 'Projecting Paradise,' p. 179.
[29] Ponting, 'Projecting Paradise,' p. 176.
[30] Crouch, Jackson, and Thompson, 'The Media and the Tourist Imagination,' p. 2.

The imagination, they argue, sparked by the media, informs our desire for and anticipation of travel; it prompts individuals to not just dream about a holiday but to embark on it. At the same time, they note that the actuality of travel adds to our imaginative repertoire. Our experiences inform any future imaginings. In addition, travel experiences may also make their way back into the media and in this way tourism and the media come to exist in a self-feeding loop of travel and destination images.[31] These can be textual and visual, media and popular culture-driven, and they in turn inform the tourist imagination and broader tourist imaginaries.[32] Such imaginaries, which may include but also go beyond media images, are best understood as "representational assemblages that are used as meaning-making devices."[33] They inevitably shape the way individuals "act, cognize and value the world,"[34] or more specifically, the way in which individuals perceive, understand, behave in, and make sense of *particular parts* of the world. This returns us to South America.

As outlined above, when I visited Peru and Ecuador in 2007, I approached these travel destinations and South America as a whole with my own images, desires, and expectations already at hand. Once at the destination, my imaginative repertoire was added to, and sometimes challenged by, the images, expectations, and narrativised experiences of others. This is likely to occur in any tourist destination, as personal imaginations may frequently operate outside of, or separately to, collective imaginaries.[35] It is especially likely to occur, I would add, when the tourist destination referred to incorporates immense geographic, cultural, linguistic, and socio-political diversity.

Despite being a continent, South America is frequently positioned within travel discourse as a singular destination. However, characterised variously as a nature or eco-tourism hotspot, as home to heritage sites of immense cultural value, as an opportune location for volunteering or adventure tourism, and as a locus of celebration, revelry, and excess, it is also subject – as this article demonstrates – to multiple representations and imaginaries. The ultimate goal of the project that this paper refers to is to examine, as Salazar puts it, "the human mechanics" of the "circulation" of these imaginaries.[36] That is, the research strives to examine how historic and contemporary

---

[31] Crouch, Jackson, and Thompson, 'The Media and the Tourist Imagination,' p. 3.
[32] Noel B. Salazar, *Envisioning Eden: Mobilizing Imaginaries in Tourism and Beyond* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010).
[33] Salazar, *Envisioning Eden*, p. 22.
[34] Salazar, *Envisioning Eden*, p. 22.
[35] Salazar, *Envisioning Eden*, p. 7.
[36] Salazar, *Envisioning Eden*, p. 15.

representations of South America are consumed, circulated and performed and what the implications of this are for the tourism industry, would-be tourists and destination communities. With the research in its early stages, this paper takes as its goal the more modest aim of unpacking some of the common representations which likely inform individual and collective traveller imaginaries about South America. As such, what is presented in the remainder of this article is the result of qualitative analysis of a variety of media which depict (visually and textually) travel in South America. Given my previous research expertise, particular emphasis is placed on those media which are typically consumed by backpackers or independent travellers.

Qualitative Analysis of Organic and Induced Media
In order to better understand the multiple representations of travel in South America that backpackers and other independent travellers are likely exposed to, a selection of organic and induced media were chosen for analysis. As the tourist imaginary comprises a seemingly infinite number of images gained from a multitude of texts over a prolonged period of time, it was important to include both official and unofficial, and touristic and non-touristic sources. Further, given that backpackers and independent travellers are renowned for their engagement with the internet and other mobile technologies, and the various forms of social networking and new media that these give rise to,[37] it was crucial that the examples studied came from both traditional and non-traditional media. To this end, travel literature, travel guidebooks, websites, and online traveller discussion forums frequently utilised by backpackers and independent travellers were subjected to qualitative analysis.

More specifically, *The Rough Guide to South America on a Budget* and Lonely Planet's *South America on a Shoestring* were subject to content analysis with particular attention given to the types of photographic images (which operate as focal points in otherwise lengthy blocks of written text) that they feature.[38] In addition, travel destination descriptions featured in these guidebooks and on the *Lonely Planet* website were subject to discourse analysis, with emphasis placed on identifying the predominant words, phrases,

---

[37] See, for example, Michael O'Regan, 'Hypermobility in Backpacker Lifestyles: The Emergence of the Internet Café,' in *Tourism and Mobilities: Local–Global Connections*, eds Peter M. Burns and Marina Novelli (Oxfordshire and Cambridge: CABI, 2008), p. 109; Sørenson, 'Backpacker Ethnography'; and Giovanna Mascheroni, 'Global Nomads' Network and Mobile Sociality: Exploring New Media Uses on the Move,' *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2007), pp. 527-546.

[38] Regis St Louis (ed.), *Lonely Planet South America: On a Shoestring* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 2010); Lucy Bryson, Clemmy Manzo, and Robert Coates, *The Rough Guide to South America on a Budget* (London: Rough Guides, 2011).

ideas and, subsequently, themes and ideologies that they help to reinforce.[39] Travel articles on South America published on the Youth Hostel Association of Australia's *Backpacker Essentials* website,[40] and the North American-based but globally orientated *Matador Network*, a website designed to be a "nexus of travel culture worldwide," were subjected to the same treatment.[41] Likewise, more 'organic' forms of tourism media, in this case, traveller posts on the *Lonely Planet Thorntree* forum and recently released travel memoirs, were also analysed.[42]

The latter include British writer Mark Mann's *The Gringo Trail*, American writer Thomas Kohnstamm's *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?*, Australian journalist Matthew Thompson's *My Colombian Death*, Australian author Rusty Young's *Marching Powder*, and one-time safari guide turned author, Australian Peter Allison's *How to Walk a Puma*.[43] All of these novels

---

[39] See *Lonely Planet* (2012), at http://www.lonelyplanet.com/. Accessed 11/05/2012.

[40] See Youth Hostel Association of Australia, *Backpacker Essentials: Inspiration for Independent Travellers* (2012), at http://www.backpackeressentials.com.au/. Accessed 15/06/2012. This site, which provides online access to the magazine of the same name, featured 31 articles which referenced South America. Published between 2005 and 2012, 15 of these were generalist in nature (for example, making mention of South American destinations but principally concerned with eco-tourism, sport tourism, or budgeting), and 4 of these took the form of traveller recommendations for accommodation and travel websites. A final 12 articles were feature articles which focused specifically on travel in South America. These 12 were subjected to qualitative analysis, and are further discussed in this article.

[41] See Matador Network, 'About Matator,' *Matador Network: Travel Culture Worldwide* (2012), at http://matadornetwork.com/content/about/. Accessed 20/06/2012. This site featured 715 articles related to South America. These included articles dealing with topics like nightlife, dating, architecture, world events, activism and politics, the environment, arts and culture, and travel more generally. The broader scope of this website, its large author base, and solely online distribution likely account for the difference between the large number of publications it features on South America as opposed to the number found in *Backpacker Essentials*. Notwithstanding, for purposes of managing the available data set, a random sample of 15 feature articles, focused on travel in the region, were subjected to detailed analysis.

[42] See 'Thorn Tree Travel Forum,' *Lonely Planet* (2012), at http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/index.jspa. Accessed 20/06/2012. Again, in order to make a rather large and unwieldy dataset more manageable, rather than analyse all of the entries about South America which feature on the *Lonely Planet Thorntree* forum, which number at over 69,000 posts, analysis was restricted to the 84 posts and website or story links currently featured in the 'Frequently Asked Questions' section of the 'South America Branch.' One or two additional posts which exist outside of this data set are referenced within the article for illustrative purposes.

[43] Rusty Young, *Marching Powder: A True Story of Friendship, Cocaine and South America's Strangest Jail* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2003); Thomas Kohnstamm, *Do Travel*

were released between 2000 and 2012, and were chosen on the basis of the fact that they are relatively recent publications and thus widely available online and/or in bookstores. Each of these five texts can be broadly classified as providing an account of the authors' (each of whom position themselves as independent travellers or backpackers) real-life experiences in South America, and offer some insight into travel and tourism in those countries. While it is difficult to gauge the full extent of their readership and thus influence (at least not without further empirical research), the titles were selected on the basis of recommendation and/or notoriety. All five had either been recommended in online travel forums (such as *Thorntree*), in person (by travellers encountered in earlier research), reviewed by travellers on websites like amazon.com, or had received widespread media coverage. For instance, *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?*, which is Kohnstamm's account of his experiences as a Lonely Planet guidebook writer in Brazil, caused global controversy when it was intimated that he did not personally visit all of the destinations that he wrote about, dividing authors, critics, and travellers when it was released.[44] Similarly, *Marching Powder*, which is based on Young's experiences living in San Pedro prison in La Paz, Bolivia (in order to interview foreign inmate Thomas McFadden), continues to influence backpackers' impressions of the region. Many continue to seek prison tours in La Paz like those depicted in the novel, and with reports of a pending release of the film version of the story this will no doubt increase.[45]

Writers Go to Hell? A Swashbuckling Tale of High Adventure, Questionable Ethics and Professional Hedonism (Sydney: Pier 9, 2008); Mark Mann, *The Gringo Trail*: *A Darkly Comic Road-Trip Through South America* (Chichester: Summersdale, 2001); Matthew Thompson, *My Colombian Death: A Journey into the Heart of South America's Most Dangerous Country*, Kobo ed. (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2008); Peter Allison, *How to Walk a Puma: And Other Things I Learned While Stumbling through South America*, Kobo ed. (London and Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2012).

[44] See, for example, Richard Woodward, 'Armchair Traveler,' *The New York Times* (4 May, 2008), at http://travel.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/travel/04armchair.html. Accessed 20/06/2012; BBC, 'Lonely Planet Rebuts "Fake" Claim,' *BBC News* (14 April, 2008), at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7346101.stm. Accessed 20/6/2012. Accessed 20/06/2012; and James Campbell, 'Lonely Planet Reeling After Author's Fraud,' *Herald Sun* (13 April, 2008), at http://www.heraldsun.com.au/travel/news/lonely-planet-reeling-after-authors-fraud/story-fn32891l-1111116043876. Accessed 20/06/2012.

[45] See 'Standanista,' 'A Few Things You Might Not Know About "Marching Powder",' *Lonely Planet Thorntree Travel Forum* (21 July, 2007), at http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1420623. Accessed 23/06/2012; 'Zarahustra,' 'San Pedro Prison Tours?,' *Lonely Planet Thorntree Travel Forum* (28 May, 2011), at http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=2031823. Accessed

While the audience reception of these and other travel media warrants further investigation, of present interest are the representations that these texts make about South America. All of the media sources that were analysed for this article provide general insight into the embodied nature of travel, travel discourse and narrative, and travel and backpacking culture. They draw on dominant discourses like freedom, authenticity, and adventure, and highlight the way in which difference, challenge, spontaneity, risk, sociability, excess, nature, and cross-cultural interaction can lead travellers closer to such affective encounters. More importantly though, they configure these discourses and draw on the ideologies of individualism and mobility, and the valorisation of the Other, in ways specific to South America. What follows, then, is an analysis of these discourses and a discussion of the ways in which they are made manifest in the media selected for this study.

Freedom, Authenticity and Adventure in a South American 'Wonderland'
Given the extent to which they underpin broader travel and backpacker discourses,[46] it is not surprising that freedom, authenticity, and adventure were common threads between most of the texts analysed. While each of these discourses and associated representations of South America are intertwined, they do emerge in particular combinations, and frequently it seems with reference to nature and culture. The latter two themes appear to dominate many tourism industry depictions of the continent, with the natural environment and South American culture – particularly indigenous and Latino/a culture – dominating the visual imagery used by *Lonely Planet* and the *Rough Guide*.[47] Frequent references are also made to encounters with nature and local culture

---

23/06/2012; 'travellingpumpkin,' 'La Paz Prison,' *Lonely Planet Thorntree Travel Forum* (30 September, 2011), at
http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=2111789. Accessed 23/06/2012; and Tuppence Magazine, 'Marching Power Film (2012),' *Tuppence Magazine: Entertainment News and Reviews* (7 December, 2009), at
http://tuppencemagazine.co.uk/entertainment-news/marching-powder-film-2012/. Accessed 23/06/2012.
[46] See, for example, Matthews, 'Living Paradoxically'; and Torun Elsrud, 'Risk Creation in Traveling: Backpacker Adventure Narration,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2001), pp. 597-617.
[47] Of the 29 images featured in Bryson, Manzo, and Coates, *The Rough Guide to South America*, 8 depicted the natural environment via scenic photographs (11 if wildlife is included under the same heading), and 11 photographs made reference to South American culture (17 if heritage sites are included within this category). Similar ratios are seen in St Louis (ed.), *Lonely Planet South America*, with the front cover juxtaposing images of tango, guitar playing gauchos, and football with images of colonial architecture, Machu Picchu, and a blue footed booby.

in the narratives constructed by travellers themselves and in travel writing featured on both the *Matador Network* and *Backpacker Essentials*. Descriptions such as the following are not uncommon:

> Colombia is the best of two worlds: South America meets the Caribbean. Salsa wafts from everywhere – buses, shops, cafés – all day long. Despite the country's problems, people are very proud … The locals aren't jaded by tourism, they're grateful you're there and want to practise their English … on you. They're often interested in you, your country and what you think of theirs. Colombia is easily the friendliest country in South America.[48]

> With the coast clearly delineated from the Amazon basin by the epic mountain range of the Andes, the South American continent is divided into distinct geographical regions. From the surf breaks of Peru's Pacific coast to the depths of the Amazon jungle to surviving on the roof of the world in the Andes – it's not only the climate that fluctuates as you move between each area. Faces, food and dialect shift with the landscape and it's these that give the most lasting insight into life in South America.[49]

As these passages reveal, encounters with nature and culture are depicted as being essential to the South American journey. Indeed, in many of the South American travel narratives that were analysed for this article local culture and the natural environment are frequently portrayed as emblems of difference or Otherness, and are often deemed to be the source of significant emotional, socio-cultural, and/or physical challenge. As will be discussed below, such interactions are subsequently positioned as a means by which freedom, authenticity, and adventure can be experienced, and insight and/or inspiration gained. It is to these discourses, and the particular dialectics that emerge between them, that this article now turns.

---

[48] Scott Richardson, 'Colombia – No Great Expectations,' *Backpacker Essentials: Inspiration for Independent Travellers* (July, 2009), at http://www.backpackeressentials.com.au/article/feature.cfm?objectid=2188&listQueryString=searchText%3Dsouth%2520america%26formSearchSubmitted%3D1%26pageNumber%3D1. Accessed 22/06/2012.

[49] Megaz Czisz, 'Three Faces of South America,' *Backpacker Essentials: Inspiration for Independent Travellers* (March, 2012), at http://www.backpackeressentials.com.au/article/feature.cfm?objectid=3095&listQueryString=searchText%3Dsouth%2520america%26formSearchSubmitted%3D1%26pageNumber%3D1. Accessed 21/06/2012.

Finding Freedom in the Extraordinary: South America as Surreal-scape

On analysing the media chosen for this research, 'freedom' emerged almost immediately as a discursive preoccupation. It was articulated with reference to notions of escape, images of difference, diversity (socio-cultural and environmental), South American Otherness, and carnivalesque revelry. Interestingly, except for *Marching Powder*,[50] all of the travel memoirs that were analysed incorporated some reflections by the authors on their own motivations for travel, and freedom seemed to feature heavily as one of the key incentives. Mann, Kohnstamm, Thompson, and Allison all spoke at length of their desire to travel in general, and to travel to South America in particular, in order to escape the monotony and/or difficulty of home life.[51] Take for instance Mann's reflections on his desire to leave the United Kingdom:

> I couldn't get enthusiastic about a career and a pension. I wanted a spark of some kind, a crusade, an ideal. All around me, I saw a society that had lost its sense of common purpose, of community … A materialistic society that had lost sight of the sheer joy of being alive, and replaced it with self-assembly wardrobe units from IKEA. It was a fucked-up world and I couldn't find any purpose or direction in it.
>
> Maybe I'd find one in South America.[52]

Here South America is positioned as providing some meaning or a level of insight that is otherwise missing from everyday life. Certainly this is echoed in a number of the articles featured in *Backpacker Essentials*, where encounters with the natural environment and/or local culture in various parts of South America seem to provide the authors with a renewed sense of purpose or shift in perception. This is illustrated in the following reflection from Ben Gwilliam on his volunteer experience in Guyana:

> I was extremely moved by how appreciative [of our volunteer work] and generous the communities we stayed in were. These people had very little but were prepared to give so much to us. Definitely something I should start doing more in my own life.[53]

---

[50] This text focuses more on Thomas McFadden's story about his life in San Pedro prison than it does on Rusty Young's story of his travels in Bolivia.

[51] Mann, *The Gringo Trail*; Kohnstamm, *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?*; Thompson, *My Colombian Death*; Allison, *How to Walk a Puma*.

[52] Mann, *The Gringo Trail*, pp. 83-84.

[53] Ben Gwilliam, 'Volunteering in Guyana,' *Backpacker Essentials: Inspiration for Independent Travellers* (December, 2010), at http://www.backpackeressentials.com.au/article/feature.cfm?objectid=1439&listQueryString=searchText%3Dsouth%2520america%26formSearchSubmitted%3D1%26pageNumber%3D2. Accessed 23/06/2012.

Intimate encounters with locals encouraged this author to reconsider the way he lives his own life. Similarly, Tiffany Grimm gained a newfound respect for and connection with nature as a result of her travel experiences in the Amazon rainforest. She recalls:

> An orchestra of insects and birds serenaded us in our tipsy canoe, monkeys swung from the canopy of trees above our heads and fireflies danced around our sunburned shoulders. There were no appointments to be made, no meetings to attend, no planes to catch. It was just us, away from all familiarity, embracing the moment and the comfort of simplicity.[54]

In this description not only is nature and the more natural way of living that she experiences with the Secoya tribe valorised, but so too is the break from the everyday commitments, responsibilities, and distractions of home that it provides. Grimm goes on to observe that:

> …we had integrated into the culture of the Secoya tribe headed by two shamans in Lagartacocha. We spent our day's basket-weaving, wood working, jewelry making, cooking, hunting, gardening, bathing and washing our clothes in the river, sleeping on straw mats, and drinking rain water. We were submersed in a natural environment, away from all civilization – no television or stereo, cars nor streets, supermarkets or hospitals and no cold drinks or air conditioning. We were connecting with a different culture, disconnecting from the familiar and, ultimately, finding contentment in simplicity.[55]

The sense that travel in South America provides relief, or a release, from the mundane, and a greater simplicity and freedom than experienced at home, is also palpable in Thompson's literary account of his arrival in Bogotá:

> The Bogotá night is wonderful, cool and spacious with stars appearing and disappearing as clouds permit. I lie back and spread my arms open to the faded starlight ... The juice is returning. After years of life becoming ever more nailed down and defined, more boxed in by predictability and the performance targets of being a dutiful employee, husband and now father, I am adrift again, floating through the Andes and it feels fantastic ... For the first time in years the great unknown world has opened to me. I hover between earth and sky, liberated after so long.[56]

---

[54] Tiffany Grimm, 'Ecuador – Surrender in South America,' *Backpacker Essentials: Inspiration for Independent Travellers* (June, 2007), at http://www.backpackeressentials.com.au/article/feature.cfm?objectid=1456&listQueryString=searchText%3Dsouth%2520america%26formSearchSubmitted%3D1%26pageNumber%3D1. Accessed 21/06/2012.

[55] Grimm, 'Ecuador.'

[56] Thompson, *My Colombian Death*, pp. 51-52/114 (Chapter 4).

Being open to the world and being liberated by travel is not, of course, an experience only to be found in Colombia or South America, nor is it a discourse that is exclusive to travel writing. Numerous academic studies of tourism and tourists attest to the significance of travel for personal growth, and self and world-making.[57] However, in most of the media here analysed, it seems that South America is characterised *specifically* in terms of its potential to operate as a source of unique travel moments. There is a sense that this continent, above all others, is a purveyor of spontaneous and surreal experience and that the 'hot-blooded' and sensuous Latino/a culture, as well as the nature-orientated cultures of indigenous groups from the region, are crucial to this. Such configurations are prominent in all of the organic and induced media informing this article, demonstrating that the surreal and spontaneous are valued not just by travel writers charged with the responsibility of narrating a 'good story,' but also by travellers themselves.

This trend notwithstanding, of all the media that were analysed, Thompson's *My Colombian Death* represents the most purposeful search for the surreal. From the outset he characterises Colombia as a locus for extraordinary experience, touting it 'Locombia' (meaning 'mad country').[58] He explains his decision to leave his home in Australia, which he shares with his wife and newborn baby, in order to travel to Colombia in terms of his desire to live in 'a world where tension is wired through all aspects of life, the drama shaping everything'[59] This desire is so strong that he even expresses dismay when his attempts at collecting raw, edgy and 'tension-filled' experiences are at times curtailed:

> The overprotectiveness of Colombians, with all their no-zones [places he should not go as a foreigner], is driving me crazy. I wouldn't come to this country if I didn't want to take risks.[60]

South America and Colombia in particular is perceived and certainly represented by Thompson as a drama-filled world, a place that can provide him

---

[57] See, for example, Luke Desforges, 'Checking Out the Planet: Global Representations/Local Identities and Youth Travel,' in *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*, eds Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 175-192; Amie Matthews, 'Negotiated Selves: Exploring The Impact Of Local-Global Interactions On Young Volunteer Travellers,' in *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism: International Case Study Perspectives*, eds K. D. Lyons and S. Wearing (Wallingford: CABI, 2008), p. 101; and Chaim Noy, 'This Trip Really Changed Me: Backpackers' Narratives of Self-Change,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2004), pp. 78-102.

[58] Thompson, *My Colombian Death*, p. 5/8 (Chapter 1).

[59] Thompson, *My Colombian Death*, pp. 5-6/16 (Chapter 1).

[60] Thompson, *My Colombian Death*, pp. 5/32 (Chapter 6).

with the "range and depth of experience necessary" to, as he puts it, "know myself, to test my nerve, my courage, my desires and my limits."[61] Though it is taken to an extreme, his desire to be challenged and to experience adventure is not, as will be discussed below, unique. However, for present purposes what is of interest is the fact that the risks that Colombia presents are configured positively by Thompson for the freedom that they symbolise. Risk is deemed emblematic of being free from constraint, responsibility, and the norms of mundane Australian life. It is subsequently exoticised, romanticised, and chased-down by the author as he travels throughout Colombia. The end result is a travel itinerary which includes: attending a bullfight in Bogotá, meeting with paramilitaries, purchasing and consuming copious amounts of cocaine, and 'touring' some of the most impoverished local *barrios,* including a murder site and areas where there has been gang warfare.[62] He also visits the infamous Darién region between Colombia and Panama, plays *tejo* (a local game not dissimilar to discus but played with explosive devices), and finally travels to Medellín, where he befriends various local bohemians, smokes crack cocaine in a local 'crack-house,' and then finally visits a shaman in order to experience the hallucinogenic drug yagé.[63]

While many of the encounters that Thompson shares in his novel are decidedly non-touristic, the same sense of experiential diversity and opportunity for spontaneity also flows through the works of Kohnstamm, Allison, and Mann.[64] For instance, the latter's travels in *The Gringo Trail* – so named for the commonly trod path that backpackers in South America follow – incorporates hikes in the Andes, a visit to the ancient site of Machu Picchu, various festivals including Carnival in Santa Marta, Colombia, visits to renowned markets such as those in Otavalo, Ecuador, and a trip to Lake Titicaca. The novel also details jungle treks in the Amazon, city nightlife, cultural tourism experiences with indigenous groups and, finally, beach-side relaxation in Arrecifes in Colombia.[65] Interestingly, not only do these authors' accounts of their personal journeys reveal some of the same or similar experiences in some of the same or similar places, but they also correspond closely with many of the itineraries I observed or heard about in South America (see above), and the travel opportunities that are promoted in

---

[61] Thompson, *My Colombian Death*, pp. 5-6/16 (Chapter 1).

[62] Thompson, *My Colombian Death*.

[63] Thompson, *My Colombian Death*.

[64] Thompson, *My Colombian Death*; Kohnstamm, *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?*; Allison, *How to Walk a Puma*; Mann, *The Gringo Trail*.

[65] Mann, *The Gringo Trail*.

guidebooks, in traveller's own narratives (as evidenced on *Thorntree*), and in online travel websites (such as *Matador Network* and *Backpacker Essentials*).

On this basis, it can be argued that South America is characterised as an experiential and exotic wonderland far removed from the mundane, day-to-day experiences of home life. It is represented as Other, but also as a playground designed almost specifically for traveller enjoyment. On this point, the following description from the *Lonely Planet* website is incisive:

> Real travellers love South America. It's as though the continent was built for travel; a place that excites, thrills, challenges and infuriates. Sweat yourself dizzy on an Amazon canoe ride before ending the day caiman-watching on a black-water lagoon. Brave a white-knuckle bus ride down Peruvian slopes and be astounded by endless Andean vistas. Endure Patagonia's wind-driven rain while chasing life-affirming sunsets or simply lose yourself (and possibly your belongings) in the break-neck chaos of Buenos Aires or Salvador. The real reward, however, is the South American spirit. It seems like the entire continent approaches life with the enthusiasm of an old-fashioned road trip: windows down and stereo blaring. There is as much music as there are adventures to be had … South America is a continent that engulfs you and changes you – your state of mind, your outlook on life. As soon as you step foot on South American soil, the transformation begins.[66]

Again South America is represented as a heterogeneous destination; a destination where the would-be-traveller is presented with a multitude of experiences, choices, and potential adventures. While the notion of adventure and interrelated discourses of authenticity will be discussed below, what also stands out with regards to the discourse of freedom is the reference in this quote to a simultaneously homogenous or singular "South American spirit." Such spirit, it seems, exists to maximise relaxation, fun, and frivolity. In this way, South America becomes synonymous with pleasure, with revelry and, by extension, even hedonism.

The South American Spirit: Spontaneity, Revelry and Excess
Representations of the South American spirit as being resilient, exuberant, enthusiastic, and fun-loving were frequently made in the media analysed above. Many of the texts examined made reference, albeit to varying extents, to the hedonistic opportunities available on the continent and within the backpacking culture located there. For example, in two separate articles on the *Matador Network*, author Josh Heller makes reference to: partying "till the sun

---

[66] Lonely Planet, 'South America Travel Information and Travel Guide,' *Lonely Planet* (2011), at http://www.lonelyplanet.com/south-america. Accessed 25/11/2011.

rose" and subsequently "hooking up" with a fellow traveller in Buenos Aires, Argentina; to being "completely wasted" on "so much rum, so much coke, a little aguardiente, [and] six or seven Aguilas" in Cartagena, Colombia; and to the endless partying in a hostel in Medellin, which he describes as reminding him of "an endless high school house party at a rich friend's parents' house," noting that, "luckily, nobody's parents are home."[67] Similarly, in *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?*, Kohnstamm described a party in his hostel in Rio de Janeiro as follows:

> We returned from the beach and wandered into the cacophony of a party in the hallway of the Villa [hostel] that spilled out onto the back terrace. Travellers – some tanned, some sunburned, all sweaty and all in shorts, T-shirts, and bathing suits – filled small plastic cups with beer from large bottles of Skol. There was also a bottle or two of cachaça, Brazil's sugarcane firewater – similar to rum … I could smell the sharp tang of dry brick weed emanating from the back of the crowd … The hedonistic energy of the party at the Villa was intoxicating in itself. Nobody had to answer to any bosses, parents, neighbours, no one. Nobody had an alarm set for the next morning. Few even knew what day of the week it was. We were all in Rio by choice and had paid good money to be here. Therefore, it was our duty to ourselves to have fun.[68]

While hedonistic discourses (and activities such as parties, alcohol consumption, and marijuana consumption) can be found in other travel destinations around the world, and in other travel literature,[69] there is at the same time a sense in Kohnstamm's narrative that such revelry is commonplace in Brazil, as much a part of the national culture or South American lifestyle as it is a part of traveller culture. For instance, on another occasion he describes an impromptu gathering as follows:

> By the end of the evening I find myself back at Alto de Sá, where in *typical* Brazilian fashion a spontaneous street party has erupted. Students crowd the streets around charcoal grills serving kabobs, beer vendors with loaded coolers, and two capoeira circles. I am talking to a Brazilian guy and mention that I played capoeira for

---

[67] Josh Heller, '13 Hardest Partying Hostels in South America,' *Matador Network: Travel Culture Worldwide* (18 June, 2012), at http://matadornetwork.com/nights/13-hardest-partying-hostels-in-south-america/. Accessed 20/06/2012; Josh Heller, '13 South American Hostels that Rock for Traveling Solo,' *Matador Network: Travel Culture Worldwide* (6 June, 2012), at http://matadornetwork.com/nights/13-south-american-hostels-that-rock-for-traveling-solo/. Accessed 20/06/2012.

[68] Kohnstamm, *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?*, pp. 63-65.

[69] See Philip L. Pearce and Darya Maoz, 'Novel Insights Into the Identity Changes Among Backpackers,' *Tourism, Culture & Communication*, vol. 8 (2008), pp. 27-43.

> about three years ... The next thing I know I am in the middle of the circle attempting a few disoriented spinning kicks and drunken cartwheels.[70]

While most of the hedonistic pursuits that Kohnstamm takes part in during his travels seem to revolve around alcohol and sex,[71] he also documents a visible drug culture in the hostels in Brazil, describing his own involvement in the buying and selling of ecstasy and the prominence of cocaine-use among both locals and travellers. With regards to the latter, he recounts a story shared by a fellow backpacker 'Mr Yay,' who describes his time in Bolivia with reference solely to the cocaine habits that he was able to maintain there:

> 'Every time that the church bell chimed in the plaza, we would pass around a whole plate of coke with the lines cut out on it. We had a silver straw and everything, mate. We just snorted coke round the clock for two days and it was about the price of going out to dinner and a movie back home … I tell you, I'd move to Bolivia in a second and live in that hostel for the rest of my life. A fucking great country.'[72]

The association between Bolivia and cocaine is not uncommon. Indeed, *Marching Powder* is as much about the story of cocaine production and consumption in Bolivia (by locals and foreigners) as it is about anything else.[73] References to cocaine consumption in the nightclubs and bars of La Paz in that text and in *The Gringo Trail* are echoed also in the writings of backpackers themselves.[74] For instance, among a number of articles and posts about drug use in South America, the *Matador Network* features an article on 'Route 36,' La Paz's first cocaine bar, noting that the establishment "has turned La Paz, Bolivia into a hotspot for drug tourism, tempting backpackers from all over the world."[75] While the comments from readers of the article demonstrate that there are divergent views among travellers regarding the desirability of drug consumption when abroad, it is clear that South America is frequently represented and imagined (at least by less industry-centric media) with reference to one of its most famous exports. This is particularly so for Bolivia and also Colombia. Take, for example, the following traveller comment

---

[70] Kohnstamm, *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?*, p. 131, emphasis my own.

[71] See Kohnstamm, *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?*, pp. 55-69.

[72] Kohnstamm, *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?*, p. 71.

[73] Young, *Marching Powder*.

[74] Mann, *The Gringo Trail*, pp. 104-107, 112.

[75] Ross Borden, 'Cocaine Bars: A Latin American Adventure or Playing with Fire?,' *Matador Network: Travel Culture Worldwide* (20 August, 2009), at http://matadornetwork.com/bnt/cocaine-bars-a-latin-american-adventure-or-playing-with-fire/. Accessed 24/04/2012.

extracted from the *Thorntree* forum, which points to a collective or at least popular cultural imaginary which frequently conflates Colombia with cocaine:

> Ok, so I have sifted right through my big tin of coffee from Colombia and I can't find any drugs. According to american movies theres [sic] always a bag of drugs hidden in tins of coffee from Colombia. I want my drugs!!![76]

Furthermore, there is some evidence that this imaginary is drawing a unique form of dark tourism to the region. In recent years travel news reports have indicated that some independent travellers are now seeking to undertake tours of cocaine 'laboratories' in Colombia,[77] a point which has been corroborated by travellers' own discussions on the *Thorntree* forum. For instance, a recent enquiry listed on the forum by 24 year old 'Reinardo' requested information about taking a tour of a coca or cannabis plantation, or lab. He explains his interest, which incidentally echoes some of the authors of the travel literature analysed here, as follows:

> Besides travelling, hanging out and having a good time I really want to learn about Colombia. I have always been interested in the darker side of humanity and history … I want to know if there is any way to learn about the Colombia drug & violence problem besides reading books or watching movies. I'm talking about visiting a coca or cannabis plantation/lab (I read something like that is possible on the ciudad perdida trek??), visiting museums or places that deal with the civil war, the murder on elecier gaitan and la violencia, the guerrilla and paramilitary, terrorism, the cali or medellin cartels, sicarios, the cultivation of cocaine and cannabis ... Anyone who has some tips or ideas?[78]

Not only is South America typically represented then in terms of freedom, escape, spontaneity, and carnivalesque revelry, but the continent – and specific countries within it, such as Bolivia and Colombia – also seem to be imagined with reference to the consumption and production of illicit drugs. While official or induced tourism media, as represented by guidebooks, are relatively quiet on the issue, organic media are not. The latter tend to connect cocaine to

---

[76] 'Uncle_Herb,' 'I Want My Drugs!!!,' *Lonely Planet Thorntree Travel Forum* (22 August, 2007), at http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1449745. Accessed 15/11/2008.

[77] See Vicky Baker, 'The Rise of the Cocaine Tourist,' *The Guardian* (1 April, 2008), at http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2008/apr/01/colombia.southamerica. Accessed 18/11/2011.

[78] 'Reinardo,' 'Drugs, Cartel, Civil War Tourism in Colombia,' *Lonely Planet Thorntree Travel Forum* (21 March, 2012), at
http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=2173389. Accessed 22/06/2012.

the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, as well as the themes of risk and danger, which are in turn associated with discourses of authenticity and adventure.

'A Life Lived in Fear is a Life Half Lived': Danger, Risk and Adventure in the Continent

The connection between the hedonistic consumption of drugs while in South America, and notions of risk, danger, and adventure, is evident in Thompson's stories of purchasing and consuming cocaine, as well as his terrifying near-death or hallucinogenic "like-death" experience under the influence of yagé.[79] It is also exemplified by one of Mann's protagonists, who in *The Gringo Trail* delights in relaying his story of a potentially catastrophic travel experience in Bogotá to other backpackers:

> There I was in the middle of Bogotá, coked up to my eyeballs, in a hallway holding two machetes, while some drunk Colombians argued about whether or not to blow up a bar with a live hand-grenade.
> And I thought, "yep, this is Colombia, just like I imagined it."[80]

Here not only is drug use normalised as part of the Colombian experience, but so too is the violence – or at least symbolic violence – that emerges in the same temporal and social space. Simultaneously, locals are characterised as the source of spontaneity, fun and disorder, but also potential danger. In the scenario above, the 'free' South American spirit gives rise to drunkenness and passionate argument but it also has the potential to spill over into destruction. It is a characterisation common to many of the texts analysed for this research, where locals are positioned on the one hand as desirable, and yet, at the same time, as possible threats.

Many of the travel memoirs make mention of notable experiences getting to know and to develop friendships with South Americans who provide 'real' insight into a place. At the same time, the authors also make mention of the warnings they receive, oftentimes from locals, about the potential for them to be victims of crime and exploitation at the hands of other locals.[81] Backpacker narratives online and travel guidebooks reveal the same tension. For instance, on the 'FAQ's for South America' thread on *Thorntree*, after

---

[79] Thompson, *My Colombian Death*, Chapter 17.

[80] Mann, *The Gringo Trail*, p. 261.

[81] Collectively, the authors document receiving warnings about and being fearful of kidnappings, car-jackings, armed-robbery and mugging, murder, drugging, theft, rape, guerrillas, bandits, and financial exploitation. They also document dangerous roads and driving, dangerous wildlife (caiman, piranhas, anacondas), and potentially threatening natural environments (such as glaciers, mountains and other places at high altitude, and treacherous coastline).

posts providing links to other online information sources and posts regarding transport options, the key topic covered was safety and security when travelling. Numerous entries warn of trusting locals – including local authorities and tourism agents – and advise against various scams that operate in the region. Extensive instructions, such as the following (which provides a selection of the twenty tips provided by this poster) were not uncommon:

> When taking taxis from an airport to your hotel, travel in the more expensive airport taxis and ensure that the drivers have official identification … Try not to arrive in a new city or town late at night [and] … travel in a group if possible. Keep your valuables hidden … avoid going on your own to remote areas/ruins where tourists would be expected to go ... Read the guide books and talk with other tourists to find out which areas are best avoided. When leaving discos late at night take a taxi home no matter how close your hostel is.[82]

The following, perhaps more acerbic observations, which similarly position tourists as vulnerable to (predominantly) local exploitation, were also not unusual. The poster denotes those "most likely to get robbed" as those who: "walk … around with a camera around [their] neck," "put … things above the seat in the bus," "walk from the bus to the hotel with … [their] backpack," and those who make assumptions about the honesty of locals, including police and cleaning staff who are included on lists of those most likely to "rob" travellers. Similarly, according to this poster, some of the most physically dangerous activities for travellers to South America include crossing the road (for the apparent likelihood of being hit by a car), "having sex with the locals," "walking home very drunk," "getting involved in political causes," and "complaining to the police."[83]

So while experiences of South American culture and nature are deemed to yield positive results (namely insight, inspiration, fun, and freedom), and while there is also a strong emphasis placed on the importance of getting 'off the beaten track,'[84] individual travellers are also encouraged by media representations to be wary of too much local interaction or of interaction with the wrong sorts of locals. There is seemingly an ambivalence that emerges,

---

[82] 'cruzdelsur,' 'South America FAQ Thread,' *Lonely Planet Thorntree Travel Forum* (7 May, 2003), at http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=65954. Accessed 23/11/2011.

[83] 'DasRumpelstilzchen,' 'South America FAQ Thread,' *Lonely Planet Thorntree Travel Forum* (2 August, 2004), at
http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=65954&start=15. Accessed 23/11/2011.

[84] Again, this is a discourse which is common to the backpacking culture more generally. See Matthews, 'Living Paradoxically.'

then, with regards to experiencing an authentic South America. Local experience and local culture and environments are desired but at the same time individuals strive to distance themselves from, or have to come to terms with, some of the dangers these locals and the social and geographic climates in South America purportedly present. This coming to terms with risk, it would seem, is not only crucial to gaining a free and authentic experience, but also an adventure.

As Torun Elsrud writes, adventure narration requires an awareness of potential danger or a developed "risk-consciousness."[85] In a sense, there have to be risks to face, or dangers to survive and obstacles to overcome, if one is to have an authentic adventure and, importantly, to learn and grow from that.[86] As detailed above, locals and local culture are sometimes deemed to be the source of these obstacles and, as travel writing on the *Backpacker Essentials* site and the *Matador Network* indicate, at other times nature is represented as presenting the traveller with formidable challenges. Take, for instance, the following descriptions of hiking and mountain climbing in Peru:

> I reached the Sun Gate at the end of a gruelling four-day hike through high altitudes and vertical climbs and took my first look at Machu Picchu. As the stone walls pierced the early morning fog, and the entire Inca city unfolded before me, the tiredness melted away…
> I joined my hiking group in a series of hugs, high fives, and ear-splitting grins, but then pulled away for a moment of silent reflection. It had not been an easy journey, and there was a definite moment when I'd considered turning back.[87]

> At the end of the second day we arrived and camped at base camp. The following morning we were woken … [at] 1:30am! It was brutal. We each had to carry 4L of water … our tent, sleeping bag, cold weather gear and food. It was almost as heavy as the pack I had carried for 12 months of travelling. After five and a half hours of climbing we made it to the peak. Only 3 of the 5 people in our group

---

[85] Elsrud, 'Risk Creation in Traveling,' p. 603.

[86] Elsrud, in 'Risk Creation in Traveling,' has argued that for many independent travellers risk is part of a commonly constructed adventure narrative, a narrative which is essential to the construction of self and which allows young people to distinguish their own lives from the lives of others.

[87] Leora Novick, 'The Inexperienced Hiker's Guide to the Inca Trail,' *Matador Network: Travel Culture Worldwide* (13 April, 2012), at http://matadornetwork.com/trips/the-inexperienced-hikers-guide-to-the-inca-trail/. Accessed 17/06/2012.

> made it. It was one of the best feelings. It was so completely
> overwhelming that I cried.[88]

While these accounts might be considered rather standard travel narratives, nowhere is the interplay between freedom, danger, authenticity, and adventure more readily seen than in Mann's *The Gringo Trail*, which ends with the death of his friend Mark, who drowns while swimming along a dangerous stretch of Caribbean coastline.[89] This event – an example of the threat of nature made real – is certainly recounted by Mann as a tragedy. At the same time, however, death is also connected, discursively at least, with adventure. There is a sense that it is better to die having done *something*, to have risked something, than to live not having done anything at all, or anything out of the ordinary. To this end, the author observes:

> Mark's sights were set on the vast wild regions of reality that lay
> beyond the confining walls of normality and respectability … Mark
> had told me many times, too, that he wasn't afraid to die. That was
> an important thing. It meant he was free to live. The fact that he was
> prepared to go out into the surf, to accept risks, made him the person
> he was. If you'd taken him away from the Edge, you would have
> taken the Edge out of him. Taken away his life and vitality.[90]

In this passage, Mann makes clear the discursive connections that exist between freedom, authenticity, and adventure, both within his own narrative and within the backpacking culture more broadly. Not all travellers would be (or are) willing to take the sorts of risks that Mann and the other travel writers discussed here document, but many – as online travel forums and interviews with backpackers show – are. For Mark, South America, a place which is raw, vital, and volatile, a place on 'the Edge,' becomes a fitting destination for living out freely and authentically a grand, tragic final adventure. The question that remains is to what extent do such narratives in turn encourage (albeit inadvertently) other travellers – in *real* life – to also live out the same?

Conclusion

The final example presented from Mann's *The Gringo Trail* is an extreme travel scenario. However, given the dominance of discourses of freedom, authenticity, and risk and adventure in traveller culture – and the extremes

---

[88] Zoe Clout, 'Climbing Peru,' in *Backpacker Essentials: Inspiration for Independent Travellers* (September, 2006), at
http://www.backpackeressentials.com.au/article/feature.cfm?objectid=1134&listQueryString=searchText%3Dsouth%2520america%26formSearchSubmitted%3D1%26pageNumber%3D1. Accessed 23/06/2012.
[89] Mann, *The Gringo Trail*, pp. 275-278.
[90] Mann, *The Gringo Trail*, p. 283.

some are willing and encouraged to go to in order to gain unique experience – it is not entirely improbable. Especially not in destinations like South America, where some risks and dangers are normalised by the media and travellers alike, or at the very least neutralised by their positive associations with fun, frivolity, revelry and, ultimately, personal growth. In fact, even Mann's portrayal of this event perpetuates such associations.

While the media analysed for this article are not the only source of images and imaginaries pertaining to South America, it is clear that these media do construct the continent in very specific ways and that there are some commonalities and interplay between them. Most significantly, South America is represented in both the organic and induced texts as giving rise to more spontaneous and surreal experiences than what would likely be encountered elsewhere. Such experiences are frequently explained with reference to culture and nature. The idea put forth is that the locals in South America are generally friendly, fun-loving, exuberant, resilient, and ever-ready for a celebration. Nature is deemed to be vast and wild, awe-inspiring, but also welcoming or at least manageable. At other times, the unexpected and the surreal are explained with reference to either the wild vastness of nature or the fact that many countries within South America are situated in developing and post-conflict contexts and are thus impacted by ageing infrastructure, corruption, and poverty. In such situations, locals are positioned as untrustworthy and in some cases even a little backward or undeveloped. Crazy, unexpected happenings are deemed attributable to these factors, as are some of the risks and dangers associated with travel in the region. Even risks are seen as adding to the authenticity and adventure of a South American journey though (it is as if South America would not be the same without it), and thus for the most part they are subject to a positive valuation. Risk and danger are, in many cases, exoticised and romanticised – or at the very least depicted as being manageable and thus neutralised – largely because they are also deemed to give rise to unique, authentic, and memorable experiences.

While these representations appear strongest in the organic media that were analysed, they are generally not at odds with those made in industry-driven media. The guide books and online travel articles which were also analysed for this article revealed a dominant portrayal of the continent as being home to unique, authentic, and adventurous journeys. A reading of such texts leaves the would-be traveller with an image of South America which is at once heterogeneous and also homogeneous. There are references to diverse landscapes, wildlife, activities, and cultures waiting to be explored. In this sense, South America becomes a likely candidate for satiating the "experience

hunger" of young backpackers.[91] There are also, however, ubiquitous references to 'the South American spirit' or to 'travelling South America' (even when only some South American countries may have been visited). These can have the tendency of erasing or simplifying geographic, socio-cultural, political, historical, and linguistic differences.

It seems from the media analysed for this research, however, that some experiences and images do attach more readily to specific countries than others. The most prominent example revealed in the texts that were examined here is that of cocaine consumption. While this was not an image that was readily portrayed in induced tourism media (which not surprisingly tends to be more conservative in its representations), it featured heavily in organic tourism media, where it was typically associated with Colombia and Bolivia. Not only is this problematic for the destination image of these countries, but given the influence that media have been shown to have on tourist behaviour, it seems likely that it could lead to a perpetuation of such stereotypes. This is especially likely when cocaine consumption is portrayed as normal, and not problematised in any way. Indeed, in the novels analysed for this research, even travel writers who spent a great deal of time discussing the history of drug related conflict in South America[92] also relayed stories of their own and other travellers' cocaine consumption, without drawing any meaningful connection between the two. Instead, cocaine seems to be configured as part of a 'constructed' or 'existentially' authentic[93] Colombian, Bolivian or, by extension, South American experience. Such representation coincides with my own anecdotal observations of the backpacking culture in South America and with the analysis of traveller-generated content on the *Matador Network* and *Lonely Planet Thorntree* forums which have been presented here.

This is not, of course, to suggest that all backpackers or independent travellers who read these texts are likely to consider cocaine consumption normal or desirable. Indeed, as already indicated, where the topic has been raised on websites like the *Matador Network* and the *Lonely Planet Thorntree* forum, responses have been mixed. Nonetheless, examples of young travellers (like Reinardo, above) wanting to undertake the same sorts of itineraries or activities portrayed in travel literature or media abound, and point to the need for critical interrogation of the representations, and at times symbolic violence, that are made and done by travel media, including travel literature.

---

[91] Greg Richards and Julie Wilson, 'Drifting Towards the Global Nomad,' in *The Global Nomad*: *Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*, eds Greg Richards and Julie Wilson (Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto, and Sydney: Channel View Publications, 2004), p. 5.

[92] See Thompson, *My Colombian Death*; and Mann, *The Gringo Trail*.

[93] Ning Wang, *Tourism and Modernity: A Sociological Analysis* (Oxford: Pergamon, 2000).

Further research into the positioning of South America in the wider travel imaginary is therefore warranted. For one thing, the media representations of travel in South America which were analysed here are undoubtedly only a small proportion of what actually exists. Further, the media I have chosen to analyse are purposively skewed toward backpackers and independent travellers, who are likely to consume different media than, for example, cultural or eco-tourists, or to at least give the media they consume a different interpretation. That said, what is revealed from this preliminary sketch – based as it is on a small media sample – is significant if one takes into account the impact that media representations are documented to have on would-be travellers. As Nelson Graburn and Maria Gravari-Barbas have identified in a recent publication:

> …there is a continuum between reality and imaginaries, as imaginaries produce what we consider to be the reality, which, in turn, produces imaginaries. Tourist imaginaries are therefore particularly powerful, as they are able to become facts.[94]

While further empirical research is necessary to better understand how backpackers consume travel and travel-related media, and what facts they are then converted into, given the propensity of some backpackers to seek authenticity, freedom and, adventure,[95] it does stand to reason that if they are primed to expect South America to be challenging, scary, at times infuriating and perhaps even dangerous, they are also less likely to shy away from some of the experiences that make it so. Thus, risk when portrayed as inevitable and importantly as manageable, becomes for some travellers a part of the attraction: drug consumption, guerrillas, adrenaline activities, theft, uncomfortable and even scary bus rides become as much a part of the South American experience as Carnivale, the Inca trail, and white sandy beaches. This has significant implications not only for traveller safety, but also the well-being of the South American communities and environments that these tourists pass through.

---

[94] Nelson Graburn and Maria Gravari-Barbas, 'Editors' Introduction,' *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2011), p. 159.
[95] See Matthews, 'Living Paradoxically'; and Elsrud, 'Risk Creation in Traveling.'