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# Backpacker selves in a hostel: discourse, identity, and existential authenticity

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BACKPACKER SELVES IN A HOSTEL: DISCOURSE, IDENTITY, AND  
EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by  
Emley Kerry  
B.A. Louisiana State University 2009  
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I dedicate this thesis to all those who are searching for answers on the road. And to Carlos Velasco, my partner and constant inspiration: let's hit the road, but no backpacking, all right?

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## **Abstract**

Backpacker tourists are able to boldly lay claim to authenticity to local place—especially as they see themselves in relation to more (by their categorization) mainstream tourists—through the feeling of an authentic self that arises through backpacking tourism. Backpacker discourse about travel embodied travel experiences reflects and shapes sense of existential authenticity, a transformative travel euphoria in which the backpacker’s true identity is discovered through intense, sensuous experiences and perception of immersion in a foreign culture. This thesis uses ethnographic information and methods collected in a number of hostels—but primarily in Bogotá, Colombia—in order to demonstrate the relationship between the material, discursive, and phenomenological construction of identity and understanding of “authentic” local place. Through backpacking travel, these young travelers are constructing understanding of self, community, and the local, making backpacking a productive area of study for the study of tourist identity formation through language and bodily engagement.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“I want movement, not a calm course of existence.” –Leo Tolstoy

**Don't worry about going to the best party, we are going to all of them!!! First to Bogota's best outlook at La Calera Mirador, then to the best clubs in Bogota to party your ass off until 6am.**

So reads the promotional card of Hostal Sue's party bus, which offers backpackers in all of La Candelaria neighborhood the chance to live, breathe, sweat, drink the city, to party like they would like to say they've never partied before with other backpackers on the bus and in trendy Bogotá clubs.

It's July, 2013. Tonight, like every Friday night, the party bus is pumping loud music and bouncing over the potholes in the highway while Gabriela, Sandra, and I, the three hostel employees running the bus that night, try to stand steady and serve rum and cokes and vodka Sprites without spilling them all over the riders. The bus fits 30 and we're carrying 37, so 4 of the backpackers ride standing up with the employees and form part of our fireman style supply line passing drinks, cups, and ice from the passenger seat in the enclosed driver's area in the front to the empty cups being waved in the air at the back of the bus. The music is an energetic mix of Colombian current radio hits and classics, Spanish-language reggaeton and salsa, and European electronic music. “*Fueeeego*, mantenlo pren-di-do, *fueeeego*, no lo dejes apagar” rhythmically implores a hit by coastal Colombian group Bomba Estereo to keep the fire going, don't let it go out! The riders shout the “*fuego*” part, and sing, raise their arms over their heads to dance in their seats, and even stand up to dance, seemingly picking up on the message even if not understanding the Spanish-language lyrics. Gabriela, Sandra, and I are constantly refilling



cups and grabbing bottles of alcohol from the passenger's seat in the enclosed driver's section of the bus as we run out. A group of five sitting at the back of the bus is not-so-surreptitiously taking turns to go to the bathroom at the front of the bus to do the cocaine that they had bought when propositioned on the street earlier that night. Some people came on the bus alone and are getting to know their seat neighbor, and people are turning around in their seats to talk to the people behind them. The curtains on the windows are kept closed for the most part, and the field of vision is limited to the pulsing action within the bus.

The riders are backpackers from a number of hostels in La Candelaria that Sandra, Gabriela, and I spoke to while doing our promotional loop to select hostels in the neighborhood earlier in the day, and, after an hour of drinking the all-you-can-drink alcohol included in the 40.000 COP (\$21) price of the bus, we're all hurtling our way towards La Calera, a look-out point 45 minutes away from the city center. After drinking there and taking pictures of the sweeping view of the golden, twinkling lights of the city's 8.5 million residents for about 20 minutes, we'll head to Zona Rosa, the clubbing area of the city in the more affluent North, whose residents would often prefer not to set foot in the city center where all the hostels are located. In those swanky clubs, the backpackers buy expensive drinks—this is the pricey part of the city—at around \$10 each, and dance in a circle with the new friends they've just made on the bus. They pose for pictures which will later get uploaded to Facebook profiles and which they'll tag with the names of the friends they've just added. The club-commissioned photographers in this *discoteca* we frequent always come by to snap pictures of the backpackers to upload to the nightclub's website and Facebook page, because having foreigners in their club is a sort of social capital that is sure to draw more Colombians there.

From the first club we round everyone up and walk down the street and around the corner to the second. With me leading a crooked and occasionally staggering line of foreigners as if I were landing an airplane, we're usually a funny site. It's usually pretty easy to find the stragglers in the nightclub as they tend to be taller and fairer than anyone else, but occasionally they wander off to another establishment or end up connecting with someone in the club, and we have to leave without them. Hopefully they know the address of the hostel where they're staying and can figure out how to communicate to a taxi to get them there. At about 2:30 in the morning we wait for everyone at the established meeting point, and from there we walk down the street to catch our bus to the after party back in La Candelaria, in Colombia simply called an *after*, located in the basement of a hotel in La Candelaria just three blocks from where we started the night in the Sue II bar.

The ride back is always messier. Some people pass out exhausted and drunk immediately and do not wake up until we rouse them once back at the hostel. For others, the exuberant feelings of partying and intense social cohesion have often dissipated, turned to aggression with too much alcohol and too many drugs, or been ramped up to an out-of-control level. Hans, one of the group of four German males on the bus pulls me close and slurrily asks me "this is a tourist trap, isn't it?" This was the only time I have ever been asked this question, and I am pretty surprised. "You can tell me. You do your job well." He asks if the hostel hired three girls to promote the party bus to trick mainly male backpackers into signing up, playing on our sexuality and their sexual desire and desire to party. In the drunken re-evaluation in the moment, Hans feels like he had been tricked into activities he thought would be authentic. He was no longer really enjoying himself, and he began to feel manipulated, as if he had just realized what

backpackers were looking for, and recognized how we had exploited and capitalized on those desires to get him and his group to come along.

Before I can answer his question I have to run to the front of the bus to break up a fight because an English girl was accusing Gabriela, “that Colombian slut,” of hitting on her boyfriend. As we come to a stop in front of the last club, the after-hours electronic club, the girlfriend hurls her shoes at Gabriela along with a few more invectives, jumps off the bus, and takes off running barefoot down the street. The boyfriend runs after her into the night. Upon gathering up their things to get off the bus, two people realize that they cannot find their cameras. Without fail, at least one person is pickpocketed every bus despite our warnings to keep close watch on all personal possessions or leave them on the bus.

We unload those who wanted to go to the club, and those who stay on the bus will be brought back to Sue II and then walked to their respective hostels by one of the two security guards who stand on the corner of Sue II’s street in 12 hours shifts for round-the-clock surveillance. After speaking to the after-hours club bouncer, I usher those who wanted to go to the club through the velvet rope. “You’re coming to party with us, right?” several ask as they walked by. “Yeah, totally!” I assure them. As soon as everyone is in, I do an about face and begin the five minute walk back to Hostal Sue Candelaria where I was living. Another successful party bus. It is now 4:30 in the morning, and I have to be up by 10:00 to begin promoting Saturday’s excursion.

I tell this story I recorded in my fieldnotes in the summer of 2012 to illustrate the intense, sensuous experiences that in part contribute to what it means to be a backpacker. The party bus is one of the main draws of Hostal Sue, and even many of those backpackers who stay in other hostels have heard about the buses before coming to Bogotá by word of mouth and online

reviews. Bubbling anger, surging joy, sudden doubt, uncontrollable rage—these emotions bounce off the walls of the party bus and spill out into the street of Bogotá, ultimately becoming fodder for travel narratives retold within the hostel while often in the process of restaging or reenacting those same party conditions and emotions. The English couple who got in the fight on the party bus stayed in Sue (pronounced “sway”) two more nights, raucously retelling the story of the party bus to a new group of friends over a bottle of *aguardiente*, a local anise-flavored liquor consumed only in shot form.

Backpacker discourse about embodied experiences of travel exhibits a sort of euphoria that, I argue, contributes to the backpacker sense of “existential authenticity” (Wang 1999), and thus lends a sense of authenticity of both local place and self-in-place. A feeling of existential authenticity which arises through perception of immersion in a foreign culture—a sensation which appears over and over in conversations with backpackers, my own journal entries, consultant Facebook updates, and even anthropologists’ field notes and ethnographies—for a backpacker becomes both the motivation for travel and an organizing feature of backpacking identity and culture.

Combining a phenomenological approach with discourse analysis allows for a theoretical framework to understand backpacker meaning-making of self and local place through conversations in the hostel with backpacker interlocutors about powerful, life-changing travel experiences. Using qualitative research methods and analysis building on my ten months of fieldwork in Bogotá, Colombia in 2012-2013 as well as three months of additional fieldwork in New Orleans, Louisiana in 2012 and two months in Europe in 2013, I argue that through a sense of existential authenticity—a true sense of self as socially and discursively constructed within the hostel—the backpacker feels she is authentically experiencing the local; thus a sense of true self

becomes an authentic understanding of local place. Backpackers experientially and discursively set themselves apart from traditional tourists by insisting that while tourists only “see,” backpackers “experience” a place and go home “transformed” and “enlightened.” Bodily sensations and emotions in place are woven into travel narratives through which backpacking identity emerges, and this sense of self then authenticates place because of the experiences that happened there. A transformational journey through a space perceived as culturally distinct becomes narrated and understood as seeing the authentic place. Literature on existential authenticity has addressed the tourist state of being at toured objects (Wang 1999; Kim and Jamal 2007) but has not significantly discussed how self-identity is formed through these experiences and, in turn, how this authentic/authenticated self apprehends local landscape.

Additionally, I look at how the hostel serves as a stage for backpackers to perform their identity as a backpacker, to meet other backpackers and exchange group knowledge, and to use discourse about travel experiences in local places to reinforce their understanding of backpacker identity and self. The hostel, a largely communal space of collaborative, creative, constantly overlapping, and festive speech, serves as a familiar space that is within but segregated from the local where backpackers can discuss their intense, transformative travels. Without the hostel and the realm of sociability offered within, the backpacking trip would be meaningless to the backpacker, because much of the identity work of travel is achieved within the walled, enclavic tourist space where the local and the self are constructed.

Surprisingly few studies of backpackers have addressed the importance of the socialization *with other backpackers* that happens *within the hostel* (Murphy 2001; Sørensen 2003; O’Reagan 2010) focusing instead on backpacking as a seemingly constant process of escape, “an attempt to avoid other travelers” (Richards and Wilson 2004:5). These scholars

argue that backpackers are in a search of landscapes emptied both of the trappings of modernity and other tourists and teeming, instead, with that potent, life-affirming force—authenticity. I wish to shift the discussion arguing that while backpackers might indeed be searching for authenticity of place, they achieve a sense of self through the discourse that happens in interactions with other travelers within the hostel. Instead of conceptualizing the hostel as just a place to rest the body, I posit that the hostel is “good to think with” for both the ethnographer and the backpacker. I argue that backpacking is primarily a social activity and that the hostel, as part of a global network, is the most important place visited on a backpacking trip.

Other research has focused on backpacker narratives of self-transformation (Noy 2004) and powerful embodied experiences (Everett 2008; Mkono 2012; Falconer 2013), but the interviews for this kind of research happened after the trip was over and the backpacker was back home and no longer on the road and thus missed the essential character of discourse in action in the hostel. These conversations, while important for observing how backpacking narratives of self-transformation are told once back home, are disembodied from the creative setting in which stories are first told, molded, and retold to backpacker interlocutors who co-narrate, compete, shift the direction of the narrative, heckle, and add information. The content of the stories and conversations about backpacking travel experiences (outside and inside the hostel) help to (re)create the backpacker category and, through the dialogic nature of backpacker speech, locate the individual backpacker within that category and temporary community.

The purpose of this research project, then, is to analyze backpacker tourist discourse within the hostel—specifically bragging, group speech, and (group) travel narration—in conversations with other backpacker interlocutors to discuss the relationship between discourse, emergent identity, space, and understanding of local place. Through these trip-valorizing and

identity-creating interactions, coupled with the sensuous experiences the backpacker has on the trip—often enhanced by drugs and alcohol—the backpacker develops what s/he believes is a truer sense of self which validates the motives of the trip and generates a sense of authenticity of place and thus success in fulfilling trip goals. The backpacker’s sense of the real Colombia is more of an ontological state that refers to the backpacker’s internal life while on the trip rather than to an epistemologically and experientially accessible “authentic” Colombia “out there.”

I wish to explore the backpackers’ point of view, understanding of self, and subsequent social and linguistic construction of identity, because what they experience is “real, valid, and fulfilling, no matter how ‘superficial’ it may seem to the social scientist” (Gottlieb 1982:167). Scholars regularly note the irony of the backpacker’s quest for freedom (Cohen 2004) and search for authenticity (Eco 1986; Britton 1991; Baudrillard 1994), because many backpackers travel to *Lonely Planet*-recommended sites and participate in structured, mediated experiences like the Hostal Sue party bus mentioned at the start of the introduction. Other scholars doubt the seriousness of backpackers’ desires to get to know local culture, instead locating their interest more in “serious drinking and casual sex” (see Clarke 2004:502). Despite Cohen’s (2004) contention that backpackers are treated too favorably in academic literature because many backpacking scholars are former backpackers themselves, I have found that most of the literature on backpacking approaches the backpackers with a certain degree of derision and skepticism. Instead of looking to spot the contradictions between backpacker ideology and action, I will analyze the affective, bodily, performative, and material aspects of backpacking to understand how the backpacker structures and conceives of her actions and uses those experiences to create an identity.

If in fact backpackers do engage in heavy drinking and promiscuous sex, I want to understand why this is important to the backpacker and examine what role these activities play in the making of individual(ity) and community. Arjun Appadurai (1986:36) uses the term “metonymic freezing” to refer to how, within ethnographic literature (and subsequent popular understanding), one feature becomes the overriding characteristic of the group shaping all other conceptions about that group, such as India and the caste system. Backpackers are identified as partiers in academic literature, popular media representations, and those working in the tourism industry, and backpackers often self-identify as heavy drinkers looking to have a good time through experiences involving drugs, alcohol, and other backpackers. While I do not want to limit their representation to this social activity, backpackers do much of their identity work through partying, so I want to present a tapestry of its profound significance for the backpacker instead of constructing partying as a one-dimensional activity and backpackers as mindless partiers. Beyond a recognition that they drink and party, how do they construct these experiences? Why do they seek them out possibly thousands of miles from home? In addition to showing the importance of having a good time, I wish to (re)present the textures and contours of backpacking life, the ups and downs, the elations and the difficulties, and some of the special encounters and moments of intimacy with good friends, who are often met in the hostel.

Backpacking is a constructive activity that is so often uncomfortable, destabilizing, and physically destructive due to drug and alcohol consumption and unsafe sex, because, notes Emily Falconer (2013), as backpacking authenticity is constituted through bodily experiences, discomfort and pain are as much validation as pleasure. In this light, the emotional flare-up on the party bus mentioned in the opening of this introduction is not just a singular, isolated, or frivolous event to be ignored by participants and onlookers, but rather is an integral part of the



difficult, gritty, emotionally and physically challenging work of backpacker identity construction. Sore feet, a scuffed up pair of heels, wounded pride, and a pounding hangover, in this case, signal and promote identity construction, specifically when considered in the context of the backpacker's larger cause of continental exploration of other cultures.

Backpackers define themselves in relation to a community of backpackers on trips during which they experience self-reliance, acquire self-confidence, and construct self-identity. The central goal of this ethnography of backpackers (mainly in Bogotá, Colombia, but also in Europe and New Orleans, Louisiana), is to examine the importance of fun and partying, hostel interactions, and talk, and to clarify the relationships between identity and activity. This will explain how backpackers linguistically structure the meaning of travel, discursively construct identity and community, and directly and indirectly index travel identity. My goal is to paint a picture of the ecstatic and exhausting backpacker experience while shedding light on identity construction without reifying the historical, social, economic, and cultural conditions that propel the backpacker onto the road.

Before going any further, I want to establish some operational definitions for this thesis. When I began my studies, I unquestioningly called backpacking a "culture," but over the course of two and half years of study, I began to question and problematize the use of the term. I am going to walk through my development of the culture concept I will be using in my research, and through this explanation I will argue that this concept is relevant in that social interactions among backpackers—especially those taking place in the hostel—mostly in one place produce meaning, which can shape the behavior, social norms, and values.

Anthropological literature on systems of shared meanings, particularly among members who have chosen to be part of that system, has approached the subject from a number of angles

and often unproblematically. Attention paid to complexes of meaning and difference (Clifford 1997) and the organization of difference which produces structures of meaning (Hannerz 1990) characterizes this retooling of the concept of culture within anthropology. Ethnographic exploration of backpacker identity has begun to be explored in the fields of tourism studies, sociology, and psychology, but the work produced from this investigation has been hesitant to define backpacking as a culture (Anderskov 2002; Noy 2004; Welk 2004), instead describing it as a practice or a sub-lifestyle (O'Reagan 2010). I was resistant to making broad generalizations about backpackers since my research mainly focused on one hostel in Colombia, although I had spoken to many backpackers during other fieldwork and found a great deal of fundamental similarity in their practices, performances, norms, and discursive strategies. Also, even though I collected the majority my interviews and recorded most of my field notes in Hostal Sue in Bogotá, Colombia, these were backpackers who had been in hostels in various cities, countries, and continents, and while their stop in Sue would only last a few days, they would spend time in the worldwide institutionalized backpacker network of (mainly unassociated) hostels.

### **Snapshots of a community in motion**

Studying backpacking culture requires a reconceptualization of the discipline's foundational culture concept, a reworking which has been underway within anthropology for years. Given the characteristics of the backpackers and the communities they form, it does beg the question as to how to talk about shared ideas and norms among a community with little fixity, a concept which have always formed part of the definition of culture. Shared between whom? This mobile community's culture is enacted in every interaction in the geographically stationary space of the hostel, but the community's members are constantly changing, whether

leaving to participate in other communities in other hostels, or checking in to join this temporary yet constant community.

Anthropology has wrestled with the concept of culture in the last several decades, realizing that the concept as traditionally utilized was essentializing, reifying, negating difference, change, power differential, and the effect of outside influences (Said 1989; Bourgois 2006). Abu-Lughod (1991) advocates “writing against culture” and Wolf (2010) says we place concepts in bundles of understanding, because names threaten to turn into decontextualized objects. Sørensen (2003) calls backpacking a “travel culture” or “road culture” and urges for a dynamic concept of culture where culture takes place whenever activated by social circumstances. I will adopt this approach of culture as situationally enacted and discuss the creation of systems of meaning and difference within the hostel.

In Chapter 2, I will define the term backpacker, discuss how I arrived at this research, and describe my methodology. Because of backpackers’ constant mobility and thus regular turnover of 100% of my backpacking consultants, studying backpackers undermines traditional ethnographic understanding of field and community. Identifying individual hostels like those I studied for my fieldwork as nodes in a larger network of global travel and studying the comings and goings in one hostel can shed light on what a backpacker is and what a backpacker does.

The hostel is bounded but the guests are not, and backpacker identities are complex, mutable, multiple. The stationary network of hostels and the flow of backpackers between the hostels provide an interesting dialectic that speaks to the structure of travel and the identity and existential authenticity created through it. I explore the concept of existential authenticity in Chapter 3, and, through a discussion of academic literature, show how discourse, existential authenticity, performance, identity creation, and place are related. In Chapter 4, I examine the

objects and practices that index and construct identity as a backpacker, notably the discourse of bragging and the display of the iconic backpack itself. Identity categories are not pre-existing, but are discursively created, re-formed, and invoked when constructing identity, and through the construction of this identity, the backpacker is positioning herself within her understanding of backpacking culture. Looking at online bragging and expressions of backpacker identity demonstrate that backpacking is characteristic of the modern area in which virtual networks intersect with global geography of hostels.

Through an examination of backpacker narratives of “fun” and “partying” as well as bragging about travel experience, chapter 5 looks at how backpackers assign meaning, understand self and place, and locate their position in a community through speech within the hostel. Identity is semiotically constructed, and being that language is a primary resource for this construction, understanding discourse and locating the motivations for and mechanisms of identity work can give insight into how identities are constructed. Backpackers are using language to grasp what they describe as the ineffable, and I will try to analyze this tenuous language that is seen as powerful to the backpacker since it captures an important experience. The chapter will include a discussion of the emic distinctions between “backpacker” “traveler” and “tourist” from the point of view of members of both backpacker and traveler identity categories in relation to the concept of authenticity.

## **Chapter 2: Defining backpacker**

Before we can begin to discuss how backpackers construct identity through intense sensuous experiences and conversations about them, we must first construct an understanding of the term “backpacker” and what it is a backpacker does. First, I will discuss the definition of backpacker that is used in academic research on backpackers from both an emic and etic point of view. After looking at how previous scholars have defined the backpacker and the backpacking trip, I then will discuss how I came to this research through my own travels, why I located my study in Bogotá, Colombia, and the methodology I employ both in my fieldwork its ethnographic representation and analysis.

### **What is a backpacker?**

Initially, tourism was only a topic for quantitative industry-management articles, and the articles, and while later more qualitative studies looked at tourist psychology in terms of goals, motivations, and fears, they were again tailored towards developing more subtle tourist management practices. Until the 1980s, anthropological studies of tourism were relatively few within academic literature, at which point scholars began expanding upon both theoretical and empirical understanding of tourists and tourism and the discussion of tourism moved from outright criticism of tourists to a critical discussion of tourists and tourism. In-depth conversations about backpacking (by that name) within the social sciences were conspicuously absent until the early 2000s, although category “backpacking” certainly existed a good two decades before it began to receive scholarly attention.

Backpackers were originally undifferentiated from tourists in the tourism literature, but as scholars recognized the heterogeneity of tourists within certain parameters—countries of origin, travel motivations and goals, sites visited, and budget, among others—they also recognized the

existence of backpackers as a distinct (and self-distinguishing) group (Maoz 2007) separate from mainstream tourists. The definition of backpacker tourists, often represented as modern-day ideological descendants of the drifters of the 1950s and hippies of the 1960s (Cohen 1979, 2003) is contested within academic literature, but a backpacker is generally understood to be a long-term (3+ months) budget youth traveler with a flexible itinerary multiple-destination trip, who travels away from her home country to experience “authentic” local culture, meet locals and other backpackers, and achieve personal goals (Westerhausen 2002; Ateljevic and Doorne 2003).

My field notes mention backpackers being from “all over the world,” but despite differences that are quite salient within the community, they can also be seen as a relatively homogenous group. Backpackers are commonly white, well-educated, and (upper-) middle class families from Western Europe, North America, or Australia. The desire to travel and the social, cultural, economic, and political structures permitting and encouraging that type of travel are not universal, a social fact which reflected in the national, socioeconomic, and physical profile of backpackers. It must be acknowledged that these experiences are only attractive and available to individuals from certain cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds—mobility being a marker of class—and backpacking is not an interest or an option for many young adults as an elective route to self-understanding and self-transformation.

At a hostel where I stayed for fieldwork in Barcelona, Spain, the staff encouraged guests to stick a pushpin into a large world map mounted on the wall to indicate where they were from. The resulting image was a striking visual representation of the relatively few countries that backpackers call home. Clusters of red-tipped push pins indicating country of origin studded wealthier European and English-speaking countries, with only a smattering of few straggler pins in other countries. Backpackers do come from many countries and in this sense are a diverse

group, but when seen in aggregate, the political economy of backpacking jumps into sharp relief. While these pins cannot indicate the specific conditions of individual backpackers or their socioeconomic status, and it is certain that not all individuals or groups in these countries of origin has equal access to the backpacking trip, these pins, a stand-in for backpacker bodies, do present histories of colonialism and empire and specific geopolitical geometries. To illustrate, this hostel had only housed one Colombian backpacker (from Bogotá) in its 20 years of existence. Also, there was no longer room to stick push pins into the city of London, England, but historically poorer, industrial towns in England had not sent any backpackers. Asia and Africa were radically underrepresented on the map, with the exception of South Africa.

A wide range of difference between individual backpackers is possible, but the important organizing feature of backpacker identity is their perception of the degree of sameness or shared qualities among them. What a backpacker does and who a backpacker is can take on a variety of aspects, but ultimately this identity revolves around certain salient features that emerge as important to those who identify as backpackers, notably: a fun disposition, an outgoing personality, and a desire for a transformational travel experience. Backpackers recognize differences among themselves—country of origin, most obviously—but “social grouping is a process not merely of discovering or acknowledging a similarity that precedes and establishes identity but, more fundamentally, of inventing similarity by downplaying difference” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:371).

Since much time is spent in backpacker-only space only occupied by backpackers, acceptable differences—primarily nationality—are highlighted and discussed. Joking about national stereotypes is a favorite pastime at the hostel. “In France if you go outside to a park and drink beer, you’re an alcoholic. If you drink wine, it’s ok!” quipped an Israeli backpacker

swapping funny stereotypes about Europeans with a large group of European backpackers in a hostel in London. Backpackers often even refer to one another by nationality, and give playful nicknames like “Drunk French Guy,” “English Bloke,” or “zee German” that play up nationality but downplay class, race, and sexual preference. Names of the numerous individuals met at the hostel are often forgotten or never learned, but nationality is nearly always ascertained and used to refer to a person. Although whiteness is the invisible norm within the hostel, commenting on skin color would be considered rude. At the same hostel in London, a moment of tension when a white German backpacker commented on a light-skinned black backpacker’s skin color—“I’ve never seen a black Swiss person before. You don’t look Swiss at all.”—was diffused by playing a complex drinking game that highlighted acceptable national differences. Commenting on Swiss-ness would have been acceptable, as would have “ethnicity,” but commenting on “race” was not polite hostel discourse.

In a sea of loud conversations conducted during this same drinking game in the common space of the hostel, a polyglot Egyptian male who spoke English, Spanish, French, and Arabic, began to speak to his friend across the room in Arabic. Everyone fell silent. It was at this moment that I realized that after over two years of spending time in hostels in the Americas and Europe, this was the first time I had ever heard anyone speak Arabic in one. He responded to this active lull in conversation by immediately cutting off what he was saying jokingly and loudly addressing the room with both hands raised in a gesture of defense, “I know, I know, I am speaking an alien language. I will switch to English,” he said in English, the common language of the group conversation. Quickly constructing himself as the “Other” within the hostel, a category quietly confirmed by the European backpackers present, he then realigned himself within backpacking norms by acknowledging this difference and then making it acceptable with



his language ability, extreme sociability, and self-deprecating diffusion of tension, and fluid movement between with identity categories.

While backpackers do not often acknowledge in-group homogeneity, meeting someone from a country that does not normally produce large numbers of backpackers is sometimes seen as more exciting than meeting people of dominant nationalities, provided this individual is seen as accessible—i.e. they speak English and index backpacker identity, particularly sociability. The cultural capital behind being a “foreign” backpacker, i.e. an anathema within the hostel, conveys a certain degree of inherent authenticity to a backpacker and a tacit recognition of predictability of nationalities present in the hostel at any moment.

If “exotic” backpackers have a certain social and cultural capital in hostels, backpackers of one’s own nationality have less and are not as exciting to meet. In Bogotá, before going out with a group of Colombians she had met earlier that day instead of coming on the party bus like she had originally planned, Alicia, an American traveler, told me “I’d much rather hang out with a group of Colombians than a group of Americans, you know?” She shot me a knowing look. “I mean, no offense, but you know what I mean.” The offense would be that I am also American and thus worth less as an acquaintance met on the road; I would know what she meant because I, myself, had to be a backpacker. The following night, when she had no plans with Colombians, Alicia happily came on the party bus. Benji, an Australian backpacker in New Orleans, mentioned that he almost feels bad when he ends up sleeping with Australian backpackers, because he should be diversifying sexually in order get the most out of his trip.

You meet Australians and it’s like—you hook up with an Aussie chick and you’re like ‘(sigh) uh, I’m sorry,’ you know what I mean? I’m like, ‘how depressing is this? We fly all this way and we end up—’ You know what I mean?

For Benji, sexual experiences validate “fly[ing] all this way,” but not sexually experiencing another culture and instead having an intimate experience with an Australian would be “depressing.” He insisted that sleeping with someone from New Orleans would be a more authentic experience, but even sleeping with a backpacker of another nationality would be better than sleeping with a fellow Australian. Meaning on the trip can be constructed through perception of immersion in foreign-ness and difference, and having a sexual experience with someone seen as too similar—with sameness isomorphic with nation-state political boundaries—is not constitutive of backpacker identity formation.

Far from suggesting that backpackers are free from certain ties to their home culture and political and social structure, or that some sort of iron cage of rationality and modernity sends backpackers fleeing (Westerhausen 2002) as refugees, as it “forces them into becoming nomadic” (Richards and Wilson 2004:5), I argue that backpackers often recreate their own cultures and norms inside the hostel. Backpacking can be a societal and cultural critique and, as Maoz (2004) found with Israeli backpackers, although backpackers often feel propelled by their “home” societies, they create and perpetuate specific practices and norms. Mutable systems of meaning are reproduced within the hostel.

I do not mean to suggest that members of the backpacking community are perfectly interchangeable, that backpackers are a homogenized group, or that my research can speak about every backpacker in every place of the world. Individuals make up this community because of personal choices, but also because of their subject positions, larger structures that have brought or allowed them to be doing what they are, as well as an institution that supports these interests, and a network of individuals to create this community and feeling of fellowship. Like most individuals in group, backpackers do not want to be essentialized or viewed as a homogenous

community, and every conversation points out differences in types of backpackers based on personality, sociability, nationality, and preference. However, although internal differences and subcultures are easier for group members to spot than an understanding of the group as a whole or a recognition of that group as a culture (Boellstoff 2010), the backpackers I spoke with were generally comfortable with agreeing that backpacking was what I called a culture, although few used the term themselves. Many consultants agreed to backpacking being a sort of community, but they were hesitant to use the term “culture” until I defined what it was.

Scholars have written of the backpacking trip as a “time out” from the stresses of late modernity (Elsrud 1998), a self-imposed rite of passage (Teas 1988; Noy and Cohen 2005), a transformative journey (Bruner 1991; Noy 2004), and a means for increased social status once home (Cohen 2004)—descriptions which get at the motivations for backpacking and desired outcomes of travel. Recent research on independent travel has shown that many forms of backpacking are increasingly linked with forms of mass tourism and are therefore becoming more institutionalized and commodified (see Hannam and Ateljevic 2007), despite the fact that backpackers still hold their mode of travel to be radically different from that of mass tourists. Backpacker tour companies—an oxymoronic term within the backpacker paradigm of authentic travel, yet a mode of mediated group travel unproblematicized by most backpackers—represent themselves as nontouristic or authentic, whereby the mechanisms of production are hidden or “offstage” in this “staged” display (Cohen 1979).

There are many different readings of the backpacker: as a white, middle class westerner of relative affluence; naïve, selfish, escapist, reckless, crazy, unstable, adventurous, an object of jealousy, a target, and a venerated symbol of western ideology, sexuality and modernity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Several Bogotanos I spoke to, including several members of the hostel staff, said that the backpacker claims of seeing the “true Bototá” or the “authentic local” made them think “*que pecadito*,” the Colombian term for “aww,

Cohen (2004) argues that backpacker scholars are too close to the backpacking community, as many researchers of backpackers were once backpackers themselves, and he proposes removing primacy from research agendas addressing the backpackers, shifting the focus instead onto the locals' conception of backpackers. Literature on backpacking within the realm of tourism studies largely continues to disregard any emic consideration of backpacking identity. The limited contact that backpackers have with locals, despite the former's claims to the contrary, is precisely what begs for a study of backpacker construction of identity. I believe that a study of local perceptions of backpacking can be a fruitful endeavor, but studies of backpackers which analyze their point of view in order to understand identity construction are too few in number. Nick Clarke, writing about the pragmatic effects of backpacking, says that backpacking can indeed be transformational in the sense that individuals return home with a stronger sense of self and greater confidence in their ability to solve problems, and are thus more prepared for the demands of modern life due to the "real challenges" they confront when traveling (2004:499). His work, like many in tourism studies, conflates emic assertions of transformations with etic analysis of the purported transformed behaviors and acquired skills.

I hope to avoid typologizing backpackers by calling them existential tourists, because backpackers come from many different countries and cultures, and have a diversity of reasons for traveling, a plurality of expectations for their trip, and a variety of ways of achieving these goals. A recognition of backpacker heterogeneity has only occurred relatively recently in the literature (Uriely et. al 2002; Ateljevic and Dorne 2005; Hecht and Martin 2006; Maoz 2007), but in this paper I want to address how backpackers see themselves as an internally

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how adorable." This is an expression used that can be used when one is charmed by another's adorably earnest actions or behavior. When asked to explain, the Colombians I interviewed said that when they saw backpackers around the city, they thought it was cute that the backpackers felt so alive and self-realized by what they found to be authentically Colombian.

heterogeneous group with shared understandings and common characteristics. Such classifications of tourism, Edensor contends, must be understood as “varieties of practice rather than types of people” (1998:61). Rather than enumerate if there are more in-group than trans-group differences (Larsen et. al. 2011), I will attempt to highlight what backpackers see as important unifying characteristics that establish who is a backpacker and who is not. However, one identifiable unifying feature of backpackers is their claim to authenticity and “committed action” (Kim and Jamal 2007) to achieving it.

### **Methodology**

I conducted eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bogotá, Colombia in 2012-2013, as well as four months of fieldwork at a hostel in New Orleans, Louisiana in 2012 and two months of fieldwork in hostels in Spain, Portugal, England, Turkey, and Georgia in 2013. My work in Bogotá centered on the activities in the Sue hostels and the hostel-organized activities and tours outside of them. Backpacking is defined by its mobility and thus complicates the notion of the field, culture, and community, but I found a great deal of similarity among the interviews conducted in all field sites when describing who a backpacker was and what a backpacker did, as well as the type, styles, and language choice (English) of hostel speech. Aside from examining construction of the self, I wish to locate that construction as taking place within an environment structured for fulfillment of travel goals that would lead to such self-realization. Individuals are constantly negotiating and (re)constructing themselves and presenting different selves in different situations, in no small part because they must constantly introduce themselves to new people in the discursive arena of the hostel.

When Bogotano and former backpacker<sup>2</sup> Oscar Payan opened Hostal Sue (I) in the Candelaria locality of Bogotá in 2006, it was only the second hostel in the neighborhood. It opened its doors right next to Hostal Platypus, the very first hostel in all of Colombia, which had opened eight years prior in 1998. Sue Candelaria (Sue II) and a short-lived third *casa*,<sup>3</sup> all a few blocks away from each other, the next year. Sue II has more dorm rooms, a larger patio, bar, and ping pong table. Now, only seven years later, there are 51 hostels and more opening every month in La Candelaria, an area which Bogotanos now regard as the decrepit city center, the colonial heart of the city, the site some of the world's most renowned graffiti,<sup>4</sup> and, most visibly, the foreign backpacker neighborhood. Hostal Platypus closed its doors in early 2013, now making Hostal Sue the oldest hostel in the neighborhood and debatably the most well-known and most successful hostel in La Candelaria. Sue is consistently ranked as one of the top hostels on Hostelworld.com and Hostelbooker.com, and has appeared in every issue of *Lonely Planet Colombia* and *Lonely Planet: South America on a Shoestring*.

When Hostal Sue first opened, the average backpacker stayed for 1.5 days. Now, as the tourism infrastructure expands and Bogotá gains a reputation among backpackers as a city worth devoting precious travel days to experiencing, the average length of time spent in Bogotá is 2.5 days. The city of Bogotá is strategically located for travel, and many backpackers fly into and/or out of Bogotá, beginning and/or ending loops through South America there in Bogotá—Bogota

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<sup>2</sup> Oscar was born and raised in Bogotá. The majority of hostel owners the world over are former backpackers themselves, but few are local to the city or the country (or even continent) where their hostel is located.

<sup>3</sup> Sue III was sold by the end of the year. To this day it remains a hostel, yet in 2012, the Sue franchise's bus employees stopped promoting the party bus there, citing that it would be a "waste of time" because, in addition to housing backpackers, the location was letting Colombians "who would never pay to go on the party bus" occupy many of their rooms. The Colombians staying at this hostel were, for the most part, Bogotano males who seemed to be enjoying cheap lodging and constant socialization outside of their parents' house, where they would otherwise most likely live until marriage. These young men did not consider themselves to be backpackers.

<sup>4</sup> Bogotá's intentionally ambiguous graffiti laws have allowed for a flourishing graffiti scene to emerge in the city, particularly in La Candelaria and on the open stretches of vertical concrete on the highway Carrera 30. Walking graffiti tours of the street art in La Candelaria, run three times a week, are promoted in hostels.

is a populous, modern city; a gateway; a country whose backpacker-aged generation has lived with civil conflict their whole lives; a colonial and modern city that does not easily square in tourist literature with a marketing strategy. Bogotá is located at 8,612 feet (2,625 meters) in the north-west extension of the Andes Mountains so, unbeknownst to the large number of backpackers who arrive with a backpack full of short sleeves, shorts, swimsuits, and flip flops, the city is often cold, rainy, and grey. Many backpackers commented on loving Colombia but being underwhelmed or a bit disappointed by Bogota in some regards because it was spread out, chilly, dangerous in some areas and highly manicured and boring in others. Because of the rapidity with which backpackers traverse topography, they look for cities that offer: the most in a short amount of time; fit well into the short blurbs in guide books; make for good to-do lists with reviews on TripAdvisor.com; and have managed to sell themselves and turn themselves into destination cities—e.g. San Gil for adventure tourism; Taganga as dive and party town; Cartagena as a Caribbean colonial pueblo of sensual Afro-Caribbean bodies (Cunin and Rinaudo 2008). Such cities have developed what Sharon Zukin in *Lanscapes of Power* calls “their place,” “a form of location rendered so special by economy and demography that it instantly conjures up an image: Detroit, Chicago, Manhattan, Miami” (1991: 12), i.e. urban branding.

“The only danger is that you’ll want to stay” is the new Colombian tourism campaign slogan, a none-too-subtle reference to the country’s violent history. Until very recently, Colombia was considered extremely unsafe and therefore unappealing to tourists, even intrepid backpackers who thrive on an element of risk (Elsrud 2001; Larsen et. al 2011). Although the security situation in Colombia has improved dramatically in the past 20 years, Colombia is still perceived externally as a dangerous country, and there are indeed areas (which no backpacker would ever reach) with active guerilla, military, and paramilitary skirmishes. The Colombian

conflict, which began in 1964, continues between government forces and a number of guerilla and paramilitary groups to this day. The 1985 siege of the Palace of Justice by the guerilla group M-19,<sup>5</sup> which left 34 guerillas and 11 national justices dead and 12 others “disappeared” after a 27 hour hostage situation, occurred in Bolivar Plaza a few blocks from the hostel.

While the US State Department no longer advises against travel to Colombia, their website posted that “The Tourist Police in Bogota specifically caution about crimes in backpacker hostels in the Candelaria area of Bogota, noting many attacks in recent years, including a sexual assault of a U.S. citizen. Be careful when selecting a hostel- consider not just the price, but the general safety of the area.”<sup>6</sup> In La Candelaria, the Tourist Police are stationed at intervals throughout the neighborhood and at major tourist attractions to look after the sites themselves as well as the security and safety of tourists. Despite the presence of the yellow-vested policemen, however, many tourists in the area report being mugged or pick-pocketed. Until August of 2013, Hostal Sue, along with the hotel across the street and the adjacent hostel, pooled money to pay for 24-hour private security service. When the other two establishments stopped contributing their portion of the payments for the security service, Hostal Sue alone could not afford the service and installed closed-circuit camera system to monitor the premises instead.

### **Selecting a field site and stumbling onto a research topic**

I arrived to Hostal Sue in Bogotá, Colombia, in June of 2011 a little over a year after getting my B.A. in International Studies. After backpacking through Central America for four months, I caught a plane from Panama City, Panama to Cartagena on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, hoping to eventually wrap up the trip, maybe, in the Tierra del Fuego in Argentina. I

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<sup>5</sup> The current mayor of Bogotá, Gustavo Petro, is a former M-19 guerilla.

<sup>6</sup> <[http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_1090.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1090.html)> Accessed October 15, 2013.



had no flight home, and, although I had the option to go back home to start my Master's degree, I was not yet sold on the idea. My bank account was dwindling more rapidly than I had expected through Central America, when I arrived in Bogotá from the Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast via a 24-hour bus ride, I thought Bogotá looked like as good a city as any to settle down for a bit, make some money, and either continue traveling or pay for a flight home. I initially stayed at the hostel around the corner from Sue, but the hostel was loud and the rooms were cold, so the next day I re-packed my bag and walked the few steps to Sue. I applied for a job at Sue and at various hostels in the neighborhood, and after a long day of job searching, I went back to the hostel to find I had a job there waiting for me if I wanted it. From that point on I lived and worked in Hostal Sue. Interchanging shifts with another bartender Monday-Friday and running the party buses on the weekend got me free lodging and a bit of pocket change. I returned home in August to begin my first semester of graduate school.

My own experiences are what clued me in to the distinctive and interesting features of backpacking culture and, more importantly, to the near-ineffable feeling of travel bliss. Feeling self-reliant, socially engaged, clever, adventurous, free, harmonious—these were my emotions while backpacking that have helped me better to understand the backpacker point of view. This overwhelming feeling, backpackers assure you, you can only get from traveling in that way, a feeling that cannot fully be expressed in language and which eludes non-backpackers. Whether caused by intense experiences, in the case of backpackers, or causing dramatic experiences, those experiencing these emotions insist that, while what they are feeling is rational and logical, it is difficult to explain semantically. I agree with Paul Stoller (1989) that instead of idealizing knowledge and removing it from experience, we should approach it phenomenologically to avoid a limited and biased epistemology. A phenomenological approach involves a methodological

ethnographic attentiveness to emotional and embodied sensual experiences, and this is a theoretical lens for understanding the importance of these perceptions and emotions. Feeling cannot be ruled out as a part of the process of cognition, and backpackers' experiences of intense emotion can be a productive heuristic for discovery of self. As Stoller expresses it, "To breathe in the pungent odors of social life, to run [one's] palms over the jagged surface of social reality, to hear the wondrous symphonies of social experience, to see the sensuous shapes and colors that fill windows of consciousness" (2011: xii) reveals the texture of local cultures. "[M]oments of visual exhilaration and epiphany" similar to those experienced by John Wylie on his solo walk along an English coastal path (2005:234) combined with experiential elements of travel heightened by drug use and regular binge drinking are where backpackers begin to locate and understand themselves.

In her interviews with Israeli backpackers, psychologist Chaim Noy's found that backpackers *needed* to know if he himself had backpacked because if he had not, the beauty of this "great journey" could be "explained...to outsiders in a cumbersome manner, but not 'known' to [them]" (2002:271). Because I self-identified as a backpacker during my various trips, doing autoethnography (Reed-Danahay 1997) of my own travel musings can be conceptually and methodologically productive.

However, as I was backpacking, I noticed many points of difference between myself and the many backpackers I met along my trip. I resented them for not speaking or attempting to speak Spanish, for believing that they were having meaningful interactions with locals when that interaction was fumbling through a food order, and for wanting to go on packaged tours like the party bus. When asked by the Colombian mono-lingual receptionist if I wanted to sign up for the party bus that night, my first night in the hostel (note this is the bus that I ended up running and

enjoying every weekend), my response was a barely polite “Ugh, Dios. No, gracias.” These differences revealed to me that there was, in fact, something to be studied here, if we could all identify as backpackers and chose to do such similar things and yet feel so different. That being said, though, was what brought me to Bogotá the same as what brought the other backpackers? What made me think that my way of traveling, which I did indeed perceive as authentic, was more valid than theirs? What made me distinguish myself from other backpackers?

Although identifying as a backpacker and recognizing myself as belonging to a larger community, I still saw myself as different from other backpackers in ways that were important to me. This agency should also be granted to other backpackers, who are able to create an identity as a backpacker in ways that are important and meaningful to each of them. In speaking with backpackers, my struggle as a “native anthropologist” has been to defamiliarize the stories, social situations, and kinds of talk that occur between backpackers and within the hostel in order to discover a deeper meaning of backpacking culture as revealed through backpacker speech. Claudia Strauss (2005) suggests examining cross-cultural and intercultural variation, which can clue the native anthropologist in to cultural themes that might otherwise go unnoticed or unquestioned. Words have no inherent ideological meaning in and of themselves, so it is the job of the researcher to understand the implicit cultural meaning behind explicit statements through “reconstruction” of these highly present but often unrecognized or unacknowledged patterns, key words, and metaphors (Quinn 2005). Identification of these elements can lead to insight into the construction of identity, a process which is not consciously obscured, but which can become difficult to read and interpret.

When doing my fieldwork, I stayed in Sue I,<sup>7</sup> which has more private rooms and less of a reputation as a party hostel,<sup>8</sup> and I did the bulk of my fieldwork and interviewing in Sue II, where the large courtyard and bar area made it easy for me to start conversations. This, indeed, was “deep hanging out” (Clifford 1997:188). I did not want to fall into the circular logic that backpackers who stayed in Sue, known as being a sort of a party hostel, came for the party hostel and were looking to party. However, many of my consultants in New Orleans, in Europe, and in other hostels in La Candelaria told me, nearly verbatim, that they were looking for the same things that the backpackers in Sue were.

Sue’s dorm rooms cost 22,000 COP a night, around \$12, and the private rooms cost around \$30. The hostel also has four private apartments in a building a block a half from Sue I which cost the same per night as a private room.<sup>9</sup> This price is standard compared with other Colombian hostels, but in the decision to select a hostel, the price of the hostel seems to be secondary to the experience of the hostel. In fact, the hotel right across the street from Sue II charged exactly the same price for a room per person, and the Sue receptionist on duty would often send people looking for a private room in the hostel to that hotel. Whenever the backpackers expressed reservations about staying in a hotel and asked instead for hostel recommendations, the Sue staff would assure them that they could have access to the communal spaces (and thus the realm of sociability) of the hostel. The backpackers would always be satisfied with this offer.

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<sup>7</sup> During my time at Sue I, I stayed in a five bed dormitory-style room with two bunk beds and one single bed. The other bartender, Garth, from Australia, stayed in the same room, as did receptionist and bus employee Sandra occasionally. For fear that we were making the room too “lived in” and inhospitable to guests, Sandra was moved to Sue I, where she was still residing with no plans of moving when I left Bogotá at the end of August, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Sue I gets a lot of the spill-over from Sue II. Sue II is mentioned in *Lonely Planet* (and with no mention that the hostel has two locations), so many guests arrive to Sue I via Sue II, particularly couples or individuals looking for a private room.

<sup>9</sup> Guests who stay at the apartments have full entry and access to Sue I and II. Two of the apartments are studios with two single beds, and the other two apartments are much larger, with two bedrooms, full kitchen, and living room.

Although backpackers repeatedly and jokingly mention how “poor” or “broke” they are, they never mention the price of the hostel as the reason they are staying there. Prices of hostels are compared, but while it is understood that hostels are generally the cheapest form of paid lodging, backpackers do not stay in a hostel exclusively to save money. Frugality, a point of pride for backpackers, is reflected in often humorous narratives of road poverty and boastful stories about cutting economic corners, like scoring free drinks, taking the cheaper third-class bus over the cushioned, air-conditioned first-class one, or eating inexpensive spaghetti and rice for months. In addition to cutting down spending, they also take pleasure in many cases from finding a cheaper version of a packaged tour being offered to them. Yet despite this parsimoniousness, backpackers do often spend without consideration of price, and complaints about lack of monetary funds almost never come up when it comes to partying both inside and outside of the hostel. Whenever a backpacker expressed doubts about the price of the party bus, the hostel employees would mention the bottomless mixed drinks included in the price tag. The more one drank, the more economical the bus became and the less one would have to spend on expensive drinks in the nightclubs seemed to be the tacit (and at times direct) sales pitch.

Within the hostel, it was easy to establish my presence as an anthropologist because I constantly had to introduce myself to newly arrived backpackers and answer their questions about what I was doing in Colombia and how long I had been working at the hostel. I extended my participant observation opportunities by working the hostel bar, conducting backpacker tours during the week, and running the hostel’s party bus. The tours went to the Guatavita Lagoon<sup>10</sup> and the Zipaquirá Salt Cathedral outside of Bogotá (60,000 COP/\$31 each or 90,000 COP/\$47

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<sup>10</sup> The legend of El Dorado, the city of gold, is rumored to have started at the Laguna de Guatavita because of golden Muisca indigenous artifacts ritually thrown and later recovered. Those items are now on display at the *Museo del Oro* Gold Museum in La Candelaria, one of the main tourist draws in the city.

for a combined package tour<sup>11</sup>), and the party bus on Fridays went to clubs in the north of the city about 45 minutes from the hostel on Saturdays to a restaurant and warehouse-sized club in Chia, a far smaller city an hour and a half from Bogotá. I interviewed backpackers individually and in groups, groups being the most natural because backpackers are constantly sitting in the common spaces of the hostel swapping stories. Conversations were not limited to communal areas, but storytelling, meeting people, and conversations within the rooms were far less common. Following Briggs (1986), I adopted the preferred style of speech of my consultants and interviewed the backpackers in open-ended, very conversational interviews—and I always stressed to my consultants that the “interview” label was more a formality and that I would like to talk to them about their travels or chat with them about what backpacking meant to them and who they thought a backpacker was—around the hostel. Formally, these would be considered unstructured and semi-structured interviews.

### **The politics of representation**

Ethnography is not a neutral endeavor and must be understood as a representational practice of the ethnographer. In identifying individuals, I will indicate where a consultant is from and will use the title they prefer—either “traveler,” “backpacker,” or the two terms interchangeably. These emic distinctions are discussed in later chapters. Those interviews conducted in Spanish were translated into English, but all interviews with backpackers were conducted in English either because it was the only common language or because there was a non-Spanish speaking English speaker present. I received several sardonic comments from backpackers from non-English speaking countries about how after months of traveling through Colombia and South America, their English had markedly improved. I also heard backpackers

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<sup>11</sup> These tours were not very successful due to what many backpackers considered to be an unaffordable price point and the availability of inexpensive public transportation out to both sites.

lament that after months or even years of traveling through Central and South America, they had not acquired many Spanish-language skills. Most group conversations included a lot of overlapping speech that was easy to follow but difficult to transcribe, so I have attempted to retain the coherence and intended meaning of the conversation. I recorded all of the interviews with a digital voice recorder.

It must be noted I was not the only one doing analysis in the hostel. Part of the backpackers' project is to see and experience, and then recount and process that information in the hostel. They are analyzing each other's behavior and experiences as well as what they perceive to be the culture of the place where they are traveling. They also believe themselves to have higher levels of analytical skills and more of an interest in observing and analyzing than the traditional tourist. Although backpackers are there to have a good time, they see their fun as more constructive than that of the tourist.

My presence in the hostel went unquestioned—beyond the normative line of questioning to get to know someone within the hostel—as I am of the same age and profile of someone who would backpack. “I was a backpacker, right?” began a lot of my interviews. Like Noy's (2004) consultants, mine needed to know that I shared some basic knowledge with them before they felt they could share certain thoughts and experiences with me. “So what else do you want to know about backpacking?” asked one of my consultants, “because obviously—I mean, you must be a backpacker yourself though, *surely*.” His “obviously,” hesitation, and then overemphasized “surely” indicate his confusion to recognize me, a young, white, American female in a hostel as anything other than a backpacker, although my digital recorder and endless questions about what it meant to be a backpacker disrupted this understanding.

Ethnographers frequently have the problem of being mislabeled or misunderstood according to cultural categories, such as Peter Wade (1993), who during his fieldwork in Colombia was seen as a local government official in some contexts or as a spy in others. The categories backpackers would have used to classify me would have been far less severe as well as the dangers of being qualified as such, but I did fear being ostracized, being seen as a square, as someone who didn't "get it." I also wanted my consultants to "get" what I was doing as well, so throughout the course of my fieldwork I tried to demystify the "mystical activities" (DeWalt and DeWalt 2007:163) of participant observation, explaining to my consultants as much of my research as possible, and even passing along things I have written or articles that I have read about backpacking to get their opinion on the academic literature about what they felt they were doing. Some of these responses are included in this thesis.

The Sue hostels are not gender segregated, and all dorm rooms and common areas, including the individual showers, are mixed sex. Fortunately, I had access to men and women equally within the hostel; there was no women's world (Gregory 1984) or men's world which was closed off to my inquiry. I did find that there were slightly more men traveling and that they made themselves more visible within the hostel—playing ping pong, noisily exchanging stories in the bar, and playing drinking games in the courtyard—but these activities were far from entirely masculine. The crowd we attracted for the party buses was generally heavily male, sometimes almost 100%. When the ratio of males to females skewed heavily on the side of the former, these young men would register the complaint that they came on the party bus to meet girls and were enticed by the three girls promoting the bus, but once on the bus there were hardly any girls.



## **Interviewing in the field: the hostel**

James Clifford suggests that travel is a “complex and pervasive spectrum of human experiences” not required to be tied to a place, such as a travel destination or home, in order to be analyzed (1997:3). However, I wish to localize the experience of travel to those experiences which take place within the hostel, a space which, like all spaces, de Certeau (1984) writes, is shaped by spatial practices and thought and is not a given. Clifford described the hotel as “station, airport, terminal, hospital: a place you pass through, where the encounters are fleeting, arbitrary” (1997:17), a description which seems to categorize this type of lodging as a “non-place” (Augé 2009). While backpacker socializing occurs rapidly, bonds form quickly, and backpackers say they make the best friends of their lives on backpacking trips.

Justifying his fieldwork in a virtual world, Tom Boellstorff (2008) writes that globalization does not make places irrelevant. Hostels are places of stasis housing pauses in travel along routes of mobility, and if, as Clifford (1997:22) claims, ethnography “has privileged relations of dwelling over relations of travel,” then the study of the hostel functions as a point of intersection in the seemingly dissimilar discourses of travel and residence. Some of the first humanistic theorizations of space drew attention to the relationship between space, experience, and meaning (Tuan 1975, 1978) and that “space” becomes meaningful “place” through lived experience. Space is defined by the practices therein and “exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements...Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it a function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual problems or contractual proximities” (de Certeau 1984). In academic research, lived experience can be understood as performance, incorporating notions of identity, agency, power, and

resistance. Thus, in understanding the importance of place, we understand that meaning does not reside in place, but rather is performed in a place with discourse, objects, practices, bodies, activities, and technologies, which then serve to create a sense of place.

The hostel is a material and symbolic space not just for backpackers but for locals as well. After all backpackers work to establish their identity as a backpacker and are tense to accusations of being called a tourist. Most residents of Bogotá are oblivious to the sweeping of grandiosity backpacker ethos and the understanding of the importance of the hostel in backpacker travels and just see hostels as “love motels.” A preoccupation with achieving authenticity is not what leads them to ring the doorbell. Colombians youths tend to live with their parents until they get married, so sexual activity must generally take place outside of the home in “love motels” that charge by the hour or by the *rato* (a while, meaning a few hours). Amorous young Colombian couples appear at the hostel at night asking for private rooms, and they are turned away by hostel staff, not with an explanation of what a hostel is, but with a statement that the hostel is full and that there are absolutely no rooms available. When walking by the front door of the hostel, curious locals often slow their pace and look in, trying to figure out what kind of establishment Sue is. When read as a *hotel de amor*, the hostel can be seen as a blemish on the local, historical landscape; an immoral, disruptive establishment; or a business that attracts undesirable elements, or a hospitality business that discriminates against Colombians.

When I asked Bogotana receptionist Sandra how she decided when to let Colombians stay in the hostel, she said “*Depende de la pinta*” or “depends on what they look like.” Although Colombian and Bogotano indexes of class and socioeconomic status might be lost on the backpacker, Sandra’s reading of *pinta* plus her beliefs about who would contribute to the hostel

environment guided her decisions as to whether open the front door more than a crack to speak to Colombians. Colombia has a very clearly stratified and codified socioeconomic class system known as *estratos*, the six designations therein based on wealth, with one being the lowest and receiving the most government support, and six being the highest and contributing the most to the social welfare system. Colombians often identify themselves by their *estrato*, and Sandra, as part of *estrato 5* (each of her parents have a house and her mother has a country home, she explained to me), believed she could recognize those from lower *estratos* who should not be allowed into the hostel because they would inevitably rob the hostel's guests. Why else, in her mind, would a Colombian want to stay as a guest just a few nights in a hostel?

The tensions between the aims and vision of backpackers, hostel management practices, and the local understanding and judgment of backpackers and hotels themselves came to the fore in July of 2013 when the local mayor of La Candelaria began an attempt to edge hostels out of the neighborhood. Working under the assumption that backpackers did not economically enrich the locality, the local mayor's office began the process of re-zoning all of the local hospitality businesses, eliminating the classification "hostel" and forcing hostels to re-classify themselves or to shut down. The process is still underway and hostels, with the support of the *Cluster de Turismo*, the local business association, are fighting the proposed change. Oscar, as owner of the Sue hostels and Vice-President of this local board, has argued very publically that backpackers have been instrumental in positively transforming La Candelaria, changing foreign perception of Colombia, bringing capital to the area, as well as ultimately paving the way for bigger dollar mainstream tourism.

When doing fieldwork, eliciting talk about the hostel and in the hostel was paramount. As Susan Gal writes: "Whatever counts as a 'site,' ethnographers must engage people in talk

about and in it; they must decipher semiotic/linguistic materials. Communicative action remains the major source of ethnographic evidence” (2012:38). Australian backpacker Victor, on his second day in Bogotá, told me he expected the capital to be more “ghetto” but that it actually seemed quite nice to him. His comment speaks to a racialized fear of violence and of a certain (low) quality of life he expected in Bogotá and maybe Colombia more broadly. Many backpackers find the racialized “Other” they expect to find in Bogotá, but solidly on the other side of the hostel door.

Delaney (2002) speaks of a “ghetto” as a place of willful separation and self-imposed spatial and ideological separation, a process as much of keeping themselves in and others out, which would then, interestingly enough, make the hostel a “ghetto.” We can talk, then, not just about tourist enclaves but about tourist *enclaving*, the process by which tourists are spatially and socially segregated from non-tourists (Schmid 2008). “[The hostel is] like a small cultural island that's multicultural,” said Gregory, a French backpacker. His use of “island” brings up ideas of spatial segregation and of hostels in the backpacker route as a sort of archipelago. In the same sentence, Gregory calls the hostel a “cultural island” and “multicultural,” implying a high degree of separation from the interworkings of local place and yet a high degree of diversity inside the hostel. Backpackers search for and carve out these enclaves, with the help of exclusionary hostel policies, and the way backpacker narratives perform the voices of “tourists” and “natives” is another way of delineating “interior” and “exterior” and of demarcating the community’s borders (Noy 2007). However, instead of cutting the backpacker off from trip experiences, what happens in the hostel is itself the most important part of the backpacking trip.

Most spaces in the hostel are communal, but are certainly not public. Very few studies speak of hostels as spaces of cultural contact between backpackers and locals (Teo and Leong

2006; Wilson and Richards 2008), focusing instead on hostels as spaces that facilitate backpacker interactions (Murphy 2001; Sørensen 2003). Locals are little mentioned in conversations about backpackers because, from what I have observed, there is typically almost no contact, much less interaction, between backpackers and locals within the hostel's enclavic tourist space. When they are discussed within the hostel, the conversation tends to be about Colombian women consumed through a masculinist, sexual gaze who see beautiful, Colombian bodies as part of the landscape and part of the draw of the country. If backpackers spend much of their time in hostels where there are few to no locals other than the employees (who in the case of Hostal Sue, do not speak English), how do backpackers come to their understanding of the authentic local? In the next chapter, I explain the notion of existential authenticity and explains how backpackers shape a sense of the local through discourse and not necessarily through interactions with Colombians or experiences out and about in Bogotá.

### Chapter 3: Existential authenticity and backpacker discourse

Backpackers, while often engaging in the same activities as the “inauthentic” tourist, deny the tourist label, consider themselves “travelers,”<sup>12</sup> a sort of “anti-” or “non-tourist” (Maoz 2007). In the dichotomy constructed and assumed by backpackers, the backpacker is interested in visiting other cultures and phenomenologically engaging with them, while tourists, in the backpacker’s mind, go on vacation and do not open themselves up to new experiences—that is, they remain firmly within the transparent boundary of the “tourist bubble” (Cohen 1985), return home the same person as when they left, and allow the structure of their trip and their fixed itineraries to dictate and structure their experiences. Even when the backpacker engages in activities created specifically for tourists such as packaged tours and shuttle bus transportation (or even sleeping at a hostel, a site designed for travelers generally by foreign ex-travelers), she feels she is existing outside of the tourist idiom. Why is this the case? By exploring social science’s conceptions of authenticity with reference to tourism—culminating in a discussion of “existential authenticity”—I shall argue that backpackers are existential tourists, on a meaning-making quest for a “real” self, achieved through liberating touristic experiences and especially that of *communitas* (Turner 1969) with other travelers within the hostel. In conversations with other like-minded backpackers within the hostel, generally joyous and humorous retellings, the backpackers dynamically and collaboratively establish an understanding of backpacking identity and how they see themselves as belonging to it.

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<sup>12</sup> Backpackers easily switch between calling themselves “backpackers” and “travelers,” seeing the terms as practically synonymous, yet they sometimes use the term “traveler” to refer to those on extremely long-term backpacking trips. Use of the term can be pejorative, and often includes reference to traveler aesthetic of dreadlocks, facial hair for the men, prodigious travel bracelets (that they often sell to be able to continue traveling), and harem pants. Some backpackers think that these run-down “travelers” are “bums” or “neo-hippies” who give backpackers a bad name.

## **Existential authenticity**

Backpackers lay claim to an authentic form of travel and authentic travel experiences—especially as they see themselves in relation to mainstream mass tourists—through the feeling of an authentic self that arises through backpacking tourism, even though their actions often align them with the modes of tourism they reject. The sense of identity discursively and narratively constructed in the hostel—achieved through meeting people (other backpackers) and fun often brought on by drug, sex, and alcohol—provides the authentic experience that motivates and justifies the entire backpacking trip.

Muchazondida Mkono (2010) argues that although the concept of authenticity has been highly problematized and contested in scholarly debates for over half a century, the concept continues to be incredibly important to certain types of tourists and thus merits study. Since its inception in scholarly discussion on tourism, the concept of authenticity has been burdened by a rigid objectivism. While discussions of authenticity within the study of tourism originally debated whether authentic local culture was attainable to tourists (Boorstin 1961; MacCannell 1976; Cohen 1979, 1985), who were tricked into caricatured and packaged simulacra (perhaps as the intoxicated male in my opening vignette felt) (Eco 1986; Britton 1991; Baudrillard 1994), more recent literature examines the notion of authenticity as a discursive (Noy 2007), phenomenological (Falconer 2013), and semiotic (DeLyser 1999) construct constantly contested and negotiated by tourists.

MacCannell's stage metaphor of a disingenuous performance of "staged authenticity" for tourists and a "backstage" where authentic culture is really performed presupposes an authentic culture that, as has recently been agreed in anthropological literature, does not and has never existed (Greenwood 1982; Crick 1989). All cultures are inauthentic and staged in a sense (Crick

1989) because they are constantly being performed, (re)created, and interpreted by social actors (Guss 2001; Probst 2009), which speaks to the impossibility (and nonexistence) of authentic culture. With the understanding of authenticity as a construct, the discussion then shifts from the tourist's ability to uncover an extant authentic culture to the tourist's notions of authenticity and the motivating factors driving that desire for authentic local culture (Bruner 1994).

Ning Wang's (1999) existential authenticity, which has become a concept of recent popularity in tourist studies and cultural geography, refers to a state of being rather than an essentialist, objectivist approach to authenticity. It focuses on sensations, perceptions, and state of being, incorporating ideas of phenomenological inquiry into the study of tourism. Wang explains that a sense of inauthentic self arises when societal constraints are felt as eclipsing emotions, bodily feeling, and impulsiveness, and that an authentic self can be felt through a release of bodily sensations and sensual desires. However, in this conception, Wang does not completely discard objectivist notions of the authenticity of tourist objects, claiming that an authentic self can occur "regardless of whether the toured objects are authentic" (Wang 1999:355), but his "state of being" concept is more concerned with tourist activities than toured objects. This examination of state of being is what Black calls a "trend in current scholarship on embodiment, objectification, and the senses (2013:273). Urry (2002, 2007) recognizes existential tourism as a shift from tourists coming to "gaze" to tourists coming to "feel."

Because of the embodied approach's attention to the body, these studies also suggest the importance of the performance of place in the tourist experience. According to Wang, tourism can be conceived as an act of regaining authentic non-rational self controlled by the rational factors of social norms or regulations. Existential tourists can be understood as traveling to find freedom from self-constraints imposed by the confining rationality of everyday life. "It feels so



good to be thrown out of my element and feel wild,” said American consultant Elizabeth. Pushing beyond the boundaries of one’s comfort zone is a crucial part of authentic travel and achieving an authentic self. Elizabeth’s true self, when placed in a foreign environment, shows itself to be wild, untamed, and blissfully reckless. While she assured me that she does have a boisterous personality and ravenous desire for adventure in real life, she feels she is only allowed to express who she is and satisfy her true desires when she travels.

One of the constraints of everyday life is a structured idea of time. This issue was most notably brought to public attention through media coverage of Garrett Hand and Jamie Neal, an American couple backpacking together through South America, who “went missing” in Peru. A month passed and the neither of the backpackers’ parents had heard from them, they had had no activity on Facebook, and no bank transactions. Their story was released in national and international media outlets, and while I was doing fieldwork in Colombia their “Missing Persons” poster was circulating on Facebook and in hostels in Colombia. When Garrett and Jamie were finally located in Peru and alerted about the manhunt for them, they were confused by the frantic concern, having told their parents that they were going to be traveling through areas without Internet, and thus that they could be out of touch for a while. The parents viewed Peru as an extremely perilous country, and not only expected more contact, but once the couple was found, Garrett’s mother refused to believe the Peruvian government’s claims until she saw a picture of him holding his Missing Persons poster and a copy of the most recent newspaper. This story very publicly (and embarrassingly for the travelers, according to their Facebook page) brought differing conceptions of danger, perceptions of time and expectation of contact between the mobile traveler and the stationary family and showed how they had moved “from one type of time to another” (Turner 1973:221).

Cohen (2004), building on Wang's (1999) take on existential authenticity, discuss a "heightened internal state of exaltation or excitement unrelated to any external referent" that "may be induced by an appropriate environment" but is not necessarily object- or environment-dependent (51). Clark, a young American backpacker I met while working in Hostal Sue, regularly expressed his travel jubilation through exultant Facebook status updates.

Well I've made it to Armenia.<sup>13</sup> I had forgotten the feeling of being free, of being free and being on the road. Overnight bus trips through the mountains, being unprepared for how cold it gets. Ah, freedom, adventure, not a care in the world. This is life at its pinnacle. Exploration of regions surely promising to excite, to revitalize. Being in situations where English is not an option, yes, this is what I love. Smiling at strangers, them smiling back.

Clark's elation came from the significance he took from cold mountain temperatures, bumpy bus rides, and smiling strangers, which to him amount to a feeling of freedom, adventure, and harmony. That travel is transformational, beautiful, and that it is a release from societal constraints is unquestioned as Clark weaves ideas of freedom, travel, exotic Others, and revitalization into an excited narrative of a psychological and geographical journey (Noy 2005) that breathlessly yet serenely summarizes much of what it means for a backpacker to live the journey. A recognition of difference and yet a feeling of sameness is a recurring theme in existential identity construction.

Kim and Jamal (2007) applied Wang's notion of existential tourism to festival goers to examine self-making and meaning-making within the liminality of the festival space to understand how the heightened bodily feelings, freedom from societal restrictions, and sense of community create the tourist's sense of an authentic self. Some scholars (Moscardo and Pearce 1986; Steiner and Reisinger 2006; Brown 2013) have even insisted that any conversation about true selves that emerges through tourist experience must engage original philosophical concepts

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<sup>13</sup> A city in the coffee-producing region of Colombia.

“existential” and “authenticity” in the works of existentialist philosophers Sartre and Heidegger as they relate to tourism. As Brown writes: “Heideggerian phenomenology and Sartrean existentialism illuminate the unique and central function of tourism in offering not an *occasional* chance to be truly oneself, but a reflective space that is conducive to self-insight and to the examination of life priorities, and that could be a stimulus for the choice of a life of good faith” (2013:266).

### **Place and authenticity**

Looking, then, at the importance of space for existential authenticity, the hostel and the lived experience of and in that space provide the stuff of backpacker identity work and culture. The consideration of place is important in identity formation and existential authenticity because place shapes experiences as it is simultaneously shaped by experience. In examining the basis of expressions like “everything in its place” and “know your place,” Tim Cresswell (1996:3) elucidates the expectations of comportment in place, and thus place as a combination of the spatial and the social. Geographical and social notions of the same place are inseparable, as are the connections between place and normative behavior.

For Belhassen, et al. (2008), the notion of existential authenticity forgets the socio-spatial dimensions of the tourist experience, instead overly concentrating on the experiential or the subjective. Yet speaking about the existential involves combining the experiences of these strong emotions and of bodily experiences in a place, as Yujie Zhu (2012) argues. In talking about existential authenticity, the performativity of authenticity should also be taken into account as “to illustrate the transitional and transformative process inherent in the action of authentication where meanings and feelings are embodied through the ongoing interaction between individual agency and the external world (Zhu 2012:1498). This implies that in

performing authenticity, tourists also perform place. Britta Timm Knudsen and Anne Marit Waade suggest that a performative notion of authenticity “not only signifies that we do and perform places by our actions and behaviors, but that places are something we authenticate through our emotional/affective/sensuous relatedness to them” (2010:12). Lived experience is the connection between performative perspectives of place and authenticity, and “place still matters” when discussing existential authenticity (Rickly-Boyd 2013).

The hostel is the space where those powerful moments are expressed through discourse, a space apart from where the experience was lived (yet often not dissimilar, since many of the stories took place in hostels elsewhere). While Wang speaks of the self that arises through activities, I apply the concept of existential authenticity to describe a true self that arises from discourse describing tourist activities. Keeping in mind that “existential authenticity is not created in isolation within the individual, but occurs in fleeting moments, informed by social, cultural, and physical encounters” (Rickly-Boyd 2013:5), discourse is how existential authenticity—as context dependent and temporary—is intersubjectively and dialogically constituted. Discourse analysis, therefore, provides a way to study existential authenticity and the relationship between self and place.

### **Hostel discourse**

Discussing his notion of existential authenticity, Wang distinguishes between “intrapersonal authenticity” and “interpersonal authenticity.” The former comes from spontaneous, instantaneous understanding of self, while the latter from *communitas* with other travelers. One way of bridging these two types of authenticity, and showing how sense of individual intrapersonal authenticity occurs because of interpersonal identity, is through discourse.

Following from the linguistic anthropological quasi maxim of language as culture and culture as language and the understanding that “Tourism is grounded in discourse” (Dann 1996:2), I will demonstrate how backpackers creatively use language to socially construct subject positions within their understanding of larger backpacking culture. There are numerous strategies of calling up group identity and distinguishing oneself as part of one group and not of another, and this “sameness and difference are not objective states, but phenomenological processes that emerge from social interaction” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Backpackers construct identity through a variety of resources, such as the backpack itself (Shaffer 2004), clothing, and compartment, but I will be examining how they use linguistic strategies (which can make reference to the backpack, clothing, and compartment) to intersubjectively forge identity. If we look at discourse as social processes that “consist of many events, ordered or linked to each other in time” and using the theoretical “connectivity” this allows (Agha 2005:1), we can understand how this identity is constructed in relation to a shifting community and along a travel route filled.

In discussing backpacker speech in action to understand flexible, contingent, and dynamic formation of identity and culture, I do not want to ignore the performative functions of language. Performativity, according to Nash, “is concerned with practices through which we become ‘subjects’: decentered and affective, but embodied, relational, expressive and involved with others and objects in a world continually in process” (2000:655). Because social reality is not a given but is continually created “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic sign” (Butler 1988:270), my goal by representing speech as it occurs in hostels is to highlight the importance of these speech acts within the liminal, collaborative linguistic space of the hostel without stripping backpackers of dynamism. Most would find it ludicrous to be worried about representing backpackers as stationary and stagnant, but by portraying their speech as text and

through the textual analysis of this study, I do not wish to obscure the practices, processes, and (re)actions that backpacker language use represents and produces. I would like to acknowledge that I recognize that “words cannot capture, that texts cannot convey” (Nash 2000:655) the more-than-cognitive and affective, forms of movement, and modes of experience and expression, but that those processes will not be within the scope of this work. Non-representational theorists argue that text obscures the multisensory body practices and experiences, but I hope to get at this very phenomenology through exultant language expressing a truer self through bodily and cognitive experience of place.

“Identity is people’s source of meaning and experience” (Castells 1997:6), yet this site that gives rise to meaning and experience is constantly changing and being influenced by experience. Identity is the *product*, not the *source* of linguistic and symbolic practices (Bucholtz and Hall 2005a, italics in original). Identity formation has spatial and temporal dimensions (Castells 1997) as well as a variety of other characterizing features; those who chose to construct identity as a backpacker do so from a unique set of historical, social, spatial, economic, and social determinations. Backpacking is unique to late modernity (Giddens 1991), and this identity category is drawn up in response to particular historical, economic, and cultural conditions. It is a type of resistance identity, opposing hegemonic ideas of life order and progress, yet the backpacker reproduces many of the cultural and social norms of “home”: home as dwelling, and home as embodied norms. I might add to Giddens’s definition of self-identity as “not a distinctive trait possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his/her biography” (1991:63) that the self, as it is not monolithic and fixed, is also constantly (re)constructed through interactions and experience. Agentive actions to effect individual or sociocultural change or enact symbolic forms of resistance can be subtle or difficult

to read, but backpacking is a highly visible, extremely active, and proudly undertaken leap towards constructing community and a sense of identity in that albeit temporary yet ongoing community.

Studying identity as performance calls attention to aspects of identity as discursive practices (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) and it guards against reifying the idea of “identity” as a fixed category to which one ascribes in that it “highlights the ways in which people decide who to be and how to act, and the extent to which they are responsible for the consequences of such decisions” (Johnstone 2008:129). Performance, “at this moment, one of the most pervasive metaphors in the human sciences” (Thrift 2007:142), looks at non-cognitive experiences and the production of social life through everyday practices. Social subjects are produced through performances, and while there is a cultural and social norm for these performances, improvisation, creativity, and deviation from the ideals are a possibility.

#### **Chapter 4: Material culture and the social practices of backpacking identity**

Discourse reveals culture as it is invoked and produced in the moment of social interaction, and discourse analysis is the study of language use in context. If “talk is a window onto cultural thought” (Hill 2005), we can thus approach the study of culture through discourse. Previous studies looking at backpacker interactions have been highly quantitative “social situation analysis” (Murphy 2001) or merely descriptive, and while the information collected from this research is useful in studying occasions of sociability, it does not offer a look at hidden shared cultural meaning. A rigorous study of the complex system of symbolic interaction between backpackers and types of backpacker speech—as yet under-researched in anthropology—can help us study the production of culture through linguistic and other semiotic resources and how speakers create and recreate particular identities through their linguistic choices.

An ethnographic study of backpackers is unique, as ethnography has traditionally involved the extended study of individuals defined and circumscribed either by location or by extended interaction with a clearly defined group. As defined by their mobility, individual backpackers cannot be studied in a fixed location for very long; also, backpacker interactions typically involve “impromptu social interaction within a group of erratic composition with unceasing extensive changeover of individuals” (Sørensen 2003:850). The actual community studied in each moment lasts for only a few days, if not for a few hours or moments, as some people move on and new backpackers arrive. With that in mind, the best way to study identity formation and backpacking culture was through (inter)actions that are intersubjectively (en)acted at the hostel. The hostel, indeed, “influences and shapes (and vice-versa) backpacker flows,” (O’Reagan 2010) and it plays a huge role in the formation of backpacking culture as the



physical, performative, and conceptual space where backpackers come to an understanding of their identity and membership in a community.

Writing about residents of the virtual world, *Second Life*, Boellstorff (2010) notes that the most common in-world activity was socialization, and that without people to socialize with, the world would cease to have meaning. Many backpackers, like the *Second Lifers* joining the virtual world, believe that the purpose of becoming a backpacker is to socialize, with all other activities being secondary. The riddle of the empty hostel is an unsolvable one to a backpacker. For what would a backpacking trip be, argue backpackers, without others to interact with in the hostel? Similarly, staying in a hostel but being antisocial would defeat the purpose of staying there in the first place. The tourist sites backpackers visit should not reach “perceptual carrying capacity” (Walter 1982:296) or too many other tourists in places that are supposed to be local, but the hostel, on the other hand, should be full of backpackers and lively to be a satisfying experience.

It went uncommented if I spent daylight hours in front of my computer at the hostel—mostly because the individuals or small, low-key groups were doing the same—but whenever social groups formed, particularly when the sun began to do down and the majority of the backpacking guests had returned to the hostel for the night, electronics, headphones, literature of any kind, or anything that would distract from socializing became tacitly prohibited. As the daylight grew dimmer, backpackers gathered in the common areas with simple, inexpensive dishes cooked in the communal kitchen, and bottles of local liquor and beer in the center of the table, I began to get chided for “removing myself from my trip” (for those who did not yet know what I was doing yet) and for “taking myself out of the action” of what I was studying (for those who did) if I kept working. “Why are you on this trip if you’re just going to stare at your

computer the whole time?” a Swedish backpacker asked an American girl who was planning the sites that she was going to see the next day. She had spent all day out of the hostel and had had no other free moment to flip through her Lonely Planet and do some research on the information mentioned within. She sheepishly apologized, put away her computer, and joined the conversation that was happening around her in the common room.

Backpackers will comment that attempting to keep up with people “back home” removes them from the experience of the trip and they try to moderate their time spent on the internet, although they rarely disconnect completely. David Hoffman (2006) spoke of how Internet and technology separated him physically, culturally, and economically from local society when he was doing his fieldwork in Mexico on the Caribbean coast. Hostal Sue has four computers for public use, and many backpackers travel with their small netbook computers and/or iPhones, and these devices and the connectivity they provide are also seen as distancing, distracting them from fully participating in their trip, both inside the hostel and out.

Although travel schedules are highly flexible, time and activities within the hostel are implicit, but structured and socially enforced. While it was considered normative to stay in the hostel all day and drink, staying in the hostel all day “doing nothing”—read: not interacting with anyone—was a violation of cultural norms. At the hostel in New Orleans, one American male asked me if I was “saving the world” when he saw me furiously typing away on my computer writing field notes. When I told him I was getting there, he said “Well when you do, come and join us for a beer.” This was at 2:30 in the afternoon, but because a large group of backpackers drinking beer and swapping stories on the back patio had formed, my behavior had gone from being acceptable to boorish in a matter of a few friendships formed minutes before.

## **Mobility and stasis**

Mobilities—used in the plural to represent the different trajectories and types of movement and moving objects and people—and tourist mobilities in particular, are a prominent topic in the anthropological literature (Clifford 1997; Urry 2002, 2007; Uteng and Creswell 2008, Canzler et al. 2008; Hannam and Diekmann 2010; Johnson 2010). Recently, ethnographers have attempted mobile ethnographies to determine how backpackers move between enclaves (Johnson 2010). While I did take my study on the road every weekend in the party bus, I located my research at the hostel and saw my field site as primarily the spaces within. Within the hostel, the spaces between bodies, the overlap of speech, the distance the backpacker constructed between “here,” “there,” and “home”—this is where I saw the “field” of my fieldwork take shape.

The classic ethnography begins with the arrival scene of a “Lone Ethnographer” to a remote, “exotic” land and a description of entrée into society, but within the hostel my “arrival” and entrée happened almost on an hour-to-hour basis as new backpackers were constantly checking in. Although my field site became exceedingly familiar to me, all of my backpacker consultants were new every night, and the community took a slightly new color or tone with each new individual. My objects of study came to me daily.

Consultants cited the hostel as a space of sociability, and many mentioned meeting other people as one of their motivations for travel. Conversations among backpackers, which can be intense and loaded with instances of meaning-making and identity formation, usually occur in the communal spaces of the hostel. These conversations are collaborative, a great deal of information is exchanged, and identity is evoked and constructed, and through these conversations, a backpacker strengthens understanding of backpacking culture and her place in

the community. Backpackers talk about any number of subjects, but exchanging travel stories, recommending future travel destinations, and summarizing their journey thus far are recurrent and salient structural features of backpacker conversations. My consultants (and myself included) cited how, after months of traveling, they got tired of having to go through these specific details—the “script” of these culturally patterned backpacker introductions—every time they wanted to start a conversation. Vince, one of a group of five Australians traveling together that I interviewed, complained about “the magic five questions”:

Vince: ‘What’s your name? Where are you from? Where are you off to? What’re you doing?....’ It’s just like, ugh.

Sam: It gets boring, doesn’t it?

Vince: It does get old no matter how friendly and how bubbly of a person you are. It gets old, doesn’t it? We met this guy in Cambodia who was like—we went to talk to him and he was like “Right, before we start talking, I don’t wanna hear your five questions. What’s your favorite color?”

Sam: Yeah, “What’s your favorite kids cartoon? What’s your favorite dinosaur?”

Because introductions and conversations can become so repetitive, this group appreciated the attempt to break the script and have a meaningful conversation not based on formal rules or expectations of social interactions. In fact, the conversation was meaningful primarily *because* it upended expectations of a normal conversation. The content was silly and icebreaker-style, but violating the norms was appreciated and was what made Vince and Sam feel that this conversation was consequential. Vince went on to mention a few instances in which he lived incredible, transformational experiences or had wild trip adventures with someone, only to realize later that he did not know that person’s name. This is both a recognition of the conventions of backpacking conversations, and a display of the pleasure derived from overtly breaking those structural norms of conversation. Disrupting conventions—even if they are ones

set by backpackers—and acknowledging this disruption is a common register of backpacking speech that reflects backpacker ethos.

### **Bragging**

Bragging, a kind of verbal dueling, is an important register of speech in the hostel. According to Joel Sherzer (1987), verbally artistic and playful discourse such as verbal dueling is at the nexus of language and culture. In dueling, cultural meanings and symbols are engaged to a high degree, and thus the relationship between language and culture is highlighted. Because discourse is where the relationship between culture and language is enacted, modified, reinforced, and conveyed, then through ludic and creative uses of discourse like bragging/boasting—referred to as verbal dueling—this relationship is especially salient.

Backpacker speech involves a high degree of bragging about the breadth and depth of travel experience. This bragging is meant to pass unmentioned, although not unnoticed. Within the hostel, speech about travel experiences, although creative and free-flowing, is also highly structured. Because of the constant coming and going of individuals in the hostel, one is constantly negotiating status within the community, and bragging becomes the means of this constant positioning and repositioning within the volatile backpacker community. Backpacker bragging is subtle and involves discussing a number of mundane events while nonchalantly throwing in the different countries in which the stories took place. I experienced the same as Emily Falconer, who in her research with backpackers in various parts of the world, noticed that “participants would often shift between locations within the same narrative, starting, for example, with one participant discussing the immediate environmental surroundings of the city of Delhi, India, but subsequently referring to previous travelling experiences in Cuba, Vietnam and Romania” (Falconer 2013:23).

Current linguistic anthropological literature about verbal dueling does not get at the subtlety of backpacker bragging. Instead of seeking a cathartic release of aggression and violence through language (Gluckman 1954, 1963) or “blowing off steam” (Van den Berghe 1964:414), backpackers are competitively but collaboratively jockeying for a position on a social ladder that has no top rung (Sørensen 2003). Most literature on verbal dueling does not represent the backpacker register of this discourse. Instead of formal Eskimo song duels (Eckhert and Newmark 1980) or hostile verbal duels among teens (Schwebel 1997), this bragging involves good-natured, nonchalant oversharing of information or relocating their stories in another object.

By recounting narratives around objects, the backpackers are not telling their own story, but rather their bracelets, backpack patches, or travel mascot are. Valentina Pagliai (2009) argues for decoupling the understanding of verbal duelers as aggressive young men using this genre of language as a homeostatic vent to release pent up violence, but she does hold that verbal dueling is necessarily argumentative language. Pagliai’s definition, the most pacific in the bragging literature, still does not get at the tone and purpose of backpacker posturing and understated one-upmanship. Backpacker bragging is far from argumentative, and if it were perceived as such, it would be considered inappropriate speech for within the hostel. This boasting would be ineffective if conceived of, identified, or called out as such. To “duel” conjures up notions of violent opposition against an opponent. Backpacker one-upmanship is meant to be seen as constructive and as contributing to a story of a global trek that touches someplace that everyone has been. Verbal dueling is highly directed speech, whereas bragging is aimed at landing somewhere in the middle of the chatter, overlapping it and overpowering it in a way that redirects conversation to that topic. Conflict language, this is not.

Outright bragging within the hostel would be seen as poor form, so to communicate their multitude of experiences and the massive amount of knowledge accrued on the road in order to establish travel status, backpackers use proxies to tell their stories or as a jumping off point. The bragging opportunity is often created semiotically. “Travelers’ bracelets,” the thread macramé trinkets sold on the street or made by long-term travelers and sold within the hostel to earn revenue to be able to continue traveling, are one way of showing the length and at times route of trip. A bracelet is purchased in each country or stop on the trip, and then the stack of woven threads becomes a conversation piece, a way of signalling that one is traveling and a way of displaying travel cred. Almost like polyglot employees who act as information points in airports and wear flag pins indicating what languages they speak, these bracelets are a way of signaling certain types of knowledge about certain places and are a way of asking to be asked about their travel map. Sewing flag patches of different countries visited onto the powerfully symbolic and materially necessary backpack also communicates the same message.

I met one group of backpackers who were traveling with an inflatable blue reindeer and “trip mascot” that they had nicknamed Keith. This same group commented that they found Australian hostels obnoxious because of all of the “peacocking” that goes on there as everyone is trying to have the biggest personalities and tell the best stories. By projecting all of their stories onto Keith, who had traveled with them all over Southeast Asia and now South America, they could tell me about all of the places they had been without it seeming that they were showing off. Keith had his own Facebook page, and I was assured that all of his statuses and pictures “had like one million likes.” One of the group members jokingly even mentioned strapping Keith to himself when they went white water rafting in San Gil, Colombia.

This is not the Anglo-Saxon boasting of “proclaiming their self-worth in a stylized solo declaration” (Conquergood 1981). The *lack* of theatricality in backpacker boasting is what makes it so interesting and often unrecognizable. In Old English literature, each major life event—a great leap of faith, a grand battle—is prefaced by an episode of boasting. Anglo-Saxon boasting, far from being stigmatized, was seen as a positive social attribute and also served functional purposes of detailing genealogy (lineage), a timeline of life effects, a sequential narrative of accomplishments. Bragging, then, is a “personal narrative in which the speaker recollects and shapes past experiences into a sequence” (Conquergood 1981:28). Backpacker bragging and narrative serves similar purposes, although the register of the story must be carefully managed and constantly checked. Bragging is seen as pompous when made too obvious, when too much attention is drawn to the many geographical notches on the traveler’s belt. However, backpackers’ online bragging, as it occurs away from hostel norms, is much more overt.

Hate to break it to you guys...but I'm heading to yet another tropical island! This time Corn Islands [Nicaragua] in the Caribbean. But no need to be jealous: we have to fly there with a little 12-seater propeller plane that may or may not be quite old-school. Yikesss.—Caroline.

Today Obama got sworn in for his second term as the president of the USA. I got to go tubing and kayaking in the warm and clear water of the Apoyo crater lake in Nicaragua. It's pretty easy to see who got the short end of the stick here. ;)—Eliza

As mentioned, though the interactions were brief, strong friendships were forged because of experiences valorized as meaningful. From two of my consultants’ Facebook statuses declaring:

Life's just not as exciting when you're not meeting travelers from around the world on a daily basis. To all of you who I have met on the road, you have a very special place in my heart and I thoroughly enjoyed meeting you all as well as the time we spent together. —Kent



Almost 10 months of traveling in south america (sic) have come to an end, and while I enjoyed all the beautiful countries I've visited, the people I've travelled with made it really special. –Pieter

Pieter went on to list and “tag” about 50 Facebook friends, all backpackers, with whom he had shared these experiences.

### **A life and an identity in a backpack**

In backpacker speech, there is a near-fetishization of the backpack itself, and Neil Walsh and Hazel Tucker (2009) have written about the power and performance of the backpack itself. Material objects, in this case the backpack, bring backpacking social realities into being and determine corporeal ways of knowing. The backpack also affects how other people treat you and how you act in certain situations. In that way, the backpack is constitutive of experience and performance, not just reflective of it, and is co-productive of situations, experiences, and social relations.

The backpack both contains one’s whole life and symbolically represents one’s whole life at the time of travel. Below, I will reiterate part of a previously discussed conversation, but this time in order to look at discursive representation of the backpack as a metonymic representation of the whole of backpacker social and existential life. Returning to the interview I had with Hurricane, Steve, Benji, and Rachel in New Orleans,

Hurricane: Someone that has a backpack and goes to backpackers hostels and travels, not in hotels. Someone who travels as cheaply as possible.

Benji: Someone that **lives out of a backpack**.

Steve: ...Yeah, your **whole life** is in a backpack...

Hurricane: Someone that asks anthropologists for cocaine.

Benji: ....Yeah, if your **whole life’s** in a backpack I think you’re a backpacker.

Rachel: My backpack was sooo heavy. I was carrying around like a 65 pound—I was carrying my *life* around. At one point I just threw like—I gave everything away and was just like, “Take it, I don’t want to carry it anymore.”

Matthew, who identified as a traveler, rather than a backpacker, when I spoke to him in Bogotá, creates a stronger connection between the backpacker and the backpack; the backpack no longer contains the backpackers’ life, it *is* their life.

Matthew: To me a backpacker is constantly aware of their backpack, their **whole life** is their backpack, in a sense, whereas I haven’t pulled my backpack out of the closet for 6 months...[A backpacker] literally is that image of the person with the backpack and me as a traveler wouldn’t be **caught dead** having a backpack.

He also alludes to Shaffer’s (2004) idea of the intimate bodily and psychological connection between the backpacker and the backpack. In a nice echo of the theme of a whole life being (in) a backpack, Matthew takes the idea to the other extreme—that, because his life is in his apartment in Medellín, carrying the backpack in public and being recognized as a backpacker would be a sort of symbolic death of his identity as a traveler for him.

Any backpacker can articulate clear differences between her own group and groups outside of her own, and backpacker stories conjure these categories indirectly. Backpacker identity is highly individualistic and prizes the accomplishments of the social self moving over a foreign landscape and interacting with locals, even though this ideal is not acted out as much as its presence in performed narratives would lead the listener to believe. Through discourse analysis of interview data and text collected online, following chapter will examine how backpackers and travelers construct identity by differentiating between backpackers, travelers, and tourists, then firmly locate themselves as a member of one of the identity categories. These are relational identities, with inclusion in one category largely being predicated on at least momentary exclusion from another. Both identities work in opposition to backpacker and traveler ideas of what it means to be a “tourist.” While these identity categories are flexible and

dynamic, allowing for a wide range of individual variation, group membership has certain structural features that are drawn upon and reiterated by group members.

## Chapter 5: Delineating backpacker identity

In several group interviews, my question “What is a backpacker?” was turned around on me, and I was asked “What do *you* think a backpacker is? Give us your definition.” In one instance in Bogotá, working from what I had written in a few papers at that point, I told a group that I thought a backpacker had a variety of traits and motivations, but was generally someone who was interested in experiencing authentic local cultures. Before I got through my explanation, I was cut off by the group’s scoffing and laughing; one Australian male in the group pantomimed putting his finger down his throat in a gagging motion. “Authentic local cultures?” he said derisively, “We’re just here to have fun!” His friend chimed in, “Yeah, I want to do touristy shit that’s the most fun!” Although they were uncomfortable with the phrase “authentic local culture,” this group did see fun as a way to experience the “real Bogotá,” “Having fun” doing recognizably tourist activities did not make this group less of backpackers in their mind. In fact, that was their definition of a backpacker: “Someone who stays in hostels, travels with a backpack, and has a really good time for an extended period of time.” As long as they were having fun inside or outside of the hostel but with the hostel as their home base, they were still backpackers.

When asked to define what a backpacker is, most of my consultants asserted, among other postulations, that a backpacker is someone who “likes to have fun” or “travels to have a good time.” After hearing these somewhat offhand assertions, often prefaced by “just”—“someone who just likes to have fun” and “just enjoys themselves—I wanted to find out first, what this fun looked and felt like, and then why it was so important and why it had to be sought out in the form of backpacking. The way each person experiences the world colors her reality, and following this, I propose that backpacker phenomenology and epistemology shapes

backpacker ontology. Highlighting the contours of backpacker identity, the common features that lead people from distinct places and with distinct goals to call all themselves backpackers and, while recognizing major differences within the community, show how they arrive at a sense of identity and a sense of community.

Chaise LaDousa (2011), drawing on Williams' (1983) notion of keywords, picked up on the word “fun” repeatedly used by his consultants when they were speaking of how they gave meaning to their college experiences. He found that the ideology and experience of fun, independence, and freedom are cornerstones of college life in the United States, and, likewise, I find them to be equally important for backpacking.<sup>14</sup> This fun is far more serious than a “vacation” or a “holiday,” backpackers will assure you. More than being frivolous, fun was what gave meaning to the trip and to the individual through sensuous, bodily experiences—sex, drugs, alcohol, music, thin mattresses, loud music until early in the morning, cold showers, heavy backpacks, high altitude hangovers, and delicious street food.

Being open to fun requires having the “disposition” to have fun (La Dousa 2011; Mofatt 1989; Nathan 2005; Grigsby 2009). This comes up in many interviews as a key component of backpacker personality. Backpackers can be traveling for a number of reasons, but, as Norwegian backpacker Lars put it, a backpacker is a “very sociable person and is out to meet new friends and do lots of activities.” Backpacking does not just make you bold; you have to be bold and outgoing to be a backpacker. If you want to participate in the community that gives you those traits, you have to have them, or at least fake them.

Part of being disposed to fun is seeking out of accepting “randomness” with a “why not” attitude. Backpackers pride themselves on being flexible and open to new plans, especially those

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<sup>14</sup> Comparisons of backpacking to college students is not a stretch, given that most backpackers are of college age. The experience of staying in a hostel dorm for many replicates or substitutes for the experience of on-campus lodging.

recommended by people “in the know.” Once I was interviewing a group of four twenty-something backpackers from England, Switzerland, and Holland, when Sandra, working as the day receptionist, walked over and asked if the group wanted to go play *tejo*. I translated and explained what *tejo* was—a local game that involves throwing hunks of iron at a clay board embedded with explosives where the court is reserved not by increments of time but by the case of beer—to exclamations of “Yeah, let’s do it!” They asked when the hostel van that was going to take them would be leaving, and I translated that they had five minutes to get ready and be at the front door of the hostel. All four jumped to their feet and started rushing to clear the table of beer bottles and *aguardiente* that they had been drinking and grab money from their rooms, all the while insisting that the plans sounded “awesome” but that they “had no idea” what they were about to do, but that it involved “metal and explosives, mate, what more do you need in life?”

The idea of being able to go wherever, meet people, travel with them, and to be open to—and willing to follow through with—chance encounters and experiences is prevalent in backpacker decision-making and subsequent narratives and is constitutive of backpacker identity. When I asked English backpacker Sam why he had chosen Colombia as the first stop on his trip, he answered “Because it was on the map.” As he went on to say, he had heard great things about Colombia from people he had met in hostels, and the space on the map represented an idea for him of an alluring place with possible danger, beautiful women, wild parties, cocaine buffets—an idealized place where he could get swept away by any number of amazing adventures. The perception of Colombia as a place of volatility and instability appealed to Sam’s desire for unplanned experiences.

Swiss American backpacker Christoff talked about meeting some Colombians at a party in Bogotá, then, unplanned and unforeseen, staying a week with one of them, then meeting one

of that guy's friends and hiking five hours through the jungle with a machete to find a waterfall that the Colombian guy had been to years before. "Random and awesome," Christoff said, summing up the story he had just told me. Christoff's travel companion from back home, his Mexican American friend Eric, admitted he himself was not a backpacker because his trip was only a few weeks long. Primarily, however, he was not a backpacker because he did not have the capacity to meet people and to let himself be carried away to random experiences like his friend. Staying in hostels but living on the periphery of backpacker life and identity, Eric understood the important elements of the backpacking trip and of critical backpacker essence, but he could not participate firstly because his trip was too short (and perhaps would not allow him to get whisked away on adventures that might disrupt his tight trip schedule) and lacked daring decision-making, and secondly because he did not have the requisite outgoing backpacker personality.

Alicia's blog about her travels begins with a warning, because, as she explains through stories in later posts, her impulsiveness and openness to adventure often lead her to "crazy experiences."

Please don't expect to read tips on traveling here, as ALOT OF WHAT I DO SHOULDNT BE COPIED. This is just a place for me to document (for myself and anyone interested) my journeys and crazy experiences. This is NOT a travel blog. THIS is an Adventure Blog: a documentation of me colouring all over outside of the lines. I'm not sure just what it is I'm looking for except to be happy and to *live*, but so far that goal is working out pretty well :)

She has no plans, and her backpacker *carpe diem* attitude that set her on the road is the same disposition that allows her to find self-realization through travel. In interviews, she told me she considers herself a free spirit and implied that she is a nonconformist, seeing backpacking travel as a way to break social barriers, upend societal expectations, and reject beliefs of her own culture while adopting the values she sees in others.

## **Socially and situationally created identities**

My interview with Benjamin, “Hurricane,” Steve, and Rachel took place outside India House Hostel in New Orleans in March of 2013. While the group worked their way through a case of beer seated at one of the outdoor picnic tables outside, joking around and talking over each other, I spoke to them about their travels and what they thought it meant to be a backpacker. When they found out that I had done my fieldwork in Colombia, the conversation turned to drug use, partying, and what it meant to be an anthropologist, and these topics kept coming up throughout the course of our conversation. Through ludic and creative incorporation of previous and recurring conversational themes, the travelers identified themselves as backpackers and socially construct the emergent identity of a backpacker within backpacking culture. “Oh, you study the traveler,” said Hurricane, equating the two terms. Earlier in the conversation, the group asked me what I studied, and when I told them I studied cultural anthropology and had done my fieldwork on backpackers in Colombia they asked if I knew how to get them any cocaine in New Orleans (given my *obvious* cartel contacts).

Emley: So what do you think a backpacker is?

Hurricane: Someone that has a backpack and goes to backpackers’ hostels and travels, not in hotels. Someone who travels as cheaply as possible.

Benji : Someone that lives out of a backpack.

Hurricane: **Someone that asks anthropologists for cocaine.**

When responding to my question, the group acknowledges that backpackers and the framework of their trip share certain features, but, as Hurricane quickly quips, because he is a backpacker, the definition of a backpacker is a person who does whatever he does. This group asked me for cocaine at the start of our interview, so backpackers ask anthropologists for cocaine. These categories are swiftly formed and rapidly adopted, as here suddenly each of us became



representative of the group we identified as—one backpacker speaking to one anthropologist became “a backpacker” asking “anthropologists.” This is both a clever rhetorical trick and an indicator of the strength of these categories of identity. This ground-level example of identity construction shows that backpackers see themselves as the creators of their identity, not the result of it.

Backpackers spend the majority of their time inside the hostel socializing with other backpackers, writing home or in their travel journal, and temporarily dwelling in the hostel. However, as the following exchange entails, analogs of the tourist world can exist within the hostel, eradicating the necessity to explore the world outside or individuals other than those found within the hostel. Remaining within the hostel is no less productive of identity; rather, it can be more constitutive of that identity. The group asked me for some recommendations of things you’re “supposed to” do in New Orleans, and they interrupted my list at some point to comment.

Emley: ...And get a hurricane from Pat O’Brian’s.

Steve: He’s the Hurricane.

Benji: He *is* the hurricane!

Steve: We’ve got the hurricane right here!

Benji: Welcome to backpacking. Yeah, you don’t want to study him.

In a play on the name of one of their group members, the Australians tell me that they do not need to experience the infamous New Orleans alcoholic beverage because they have a version of the hurricane there in the hostel. Benjamin summarizes with “Welcome to backpacking” by presenting me with a conscious recognition of humorous backpacker logic—Hurricane trumps hurricane—and introducing me to a central tenet of their identity. All the h/[H]urricane they

need is there in the hostel, and this desire to remain in the hostel and have “fun” there is exactly what makes them backpackers and what defines backpacking identity.

In order to explain to me the range of actions that a backpacker would normally engage in, these consultants consistently drew distinctions between the visual—a type of looking described by John Urry (2002) as “the gaze”—and the experiential. The backpacker, according to their definition, “sees” things around the world and occasionally parties, but partying is not necessarily a feature of backpacking, whereas “seeing stuff” is.

Rachel: I think someone who stays in a hostel is someone who wants **to see the world**, someone who just wants **to see stuff**—

Steve: Yeah, a backpacker is someone that travels as cheaply as possible

Hurricane: With a backpack

Steve: **Gets wasted regularly...**

Hurricane: Travels cheaply. Eh they don't have **to get wasted**, they can just go and **see sights**, but it's someone who travels as cheaply as possible.

Emley: Do you think a big part of backpacking is partying?

Steve: Yeah.

Hurricane: Not necessarily, I don't think.

Benji: It's not part of the definition.

Emley: But it's a big part of it?

Hurricane: It's part of the culture, not part of the definition. Some people who are **backpackers don't drink**

Steve: And they don't socialize either...

Benji: They go round **looking at stuff...**

Emley: But that's still a backpacker?

Benji: And then there's other backpackers that **don't see fuck all** and **all they do is drink**.

Emley: And stay in the hostel, yeah.

Benji: Yeah, that's me.

Emely: That's you?

Benji: **I'm just here to party**. I don't really care. Yeah this whole trip is like...

Steve: I bet the mix on this whole trip is like **70-30**, I reckon?

Benji: Yeah, **you've seen some stuff**. I'm just **here to party**.

Hurricane: It's about **partying in different places**. **Seeing shit**, and **if you want to party you party** but if not you just go and **see shit**.

How the things "seen" show up in discourse, often told while having hostel "fun," contribute to the sense of existential authenticity. Hurricane claims that drinking is part of the culture of backpacking but not part of the definition of a backpacker. This is an interesting statement, and I believe it is his way of saying that consuming alcohol is a norm within the hostel, but the individual backpacker has the choice and is no more or less of a backpacker for whatever way they chose. Steve makes the connection between backpacking and socializing. Some backpackers do not drink, but without drinking then they're probably not socializing, he says, and meeting people is an important part of the backpacking adventure. Each person in the group establishes a dichotomous relationship between the visual practices of tourist gazing, and the embodied experience of partying. Backpackers visually consume the city and also consume alcohol, and finding a balance (70-30 worked for Steve) is key.

Steve: That's a place [Rocking Jay's Hostel in Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica] where you can actually just hang out there and it's just got its own like vibe and everything, but the town itself is cool as well. But yeah, it's one of the few places I've been to where you could just hang out there and have a good time there and that's it. **Got pretty baked**, though. **Smoked a lot of weed**. **Got pretty baked**.

One day the witch<sup>15</sup> was like “**let’s go fucking see heaps of shit**” and I was like “**let’s get some weed**” and we’re like “all right” and then we ended up sitting in the hammock all day eating vegemite sandwiches. That was one of the best days of our lives. We were just eating vegemite sandwiches rocking in a hammock.

Drug consumption is played up in narratives, and if Steve’s 70-30 partying-sightseeing ratio actually represents how they spent their time, the figures for how much time they spent talking about seeing things versus how much time they spent talking about drugs and partying would be drastically inverted. Steve then tells of one day when smoking marijuana, a sort of partying, won out over exploring the town. Steve’s narrative follows Labovian narrative structure (1994)—abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda—and the complicating action of the story, the suggestion by his then-girlfriend to explore the town, is resolved by them getting stoned and lying around on a hammock all day. Yet in this moment Steve locates one of his greatest days traveling. Backpacking is not just a “time out” (Elsrud 2001) from the stresses of daily life but also involves a time out from the activities that the backpackers say dominate their agenda.

Rachel, an American from New York who had recently packed up and moved to New Orleans without much prior planning, was living in the hostel until she could find a job and a place to live. She saw herself as being affected by backpacking culture and behavior even though she was no longer self-identifying as a backpacker.

Rachel: I keep forgetting that I’m not on vacation. I’ve gotta-I’ve gotta stop drinking everyday because I live here now. I keep thinking I’m on vacation but I’m not.

From Rachel’s former lived experience as a backpacker and current experience living in a hostel but not backpacking, she understands backpacking culture as having a lot to do with partying and operating on an irregular, non-traditional schedule. Currently residing in a city—that is, considering oneself a resident, albeit recently transplanted—is incompatible with identifying as a

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<sup>15</sup> Steve’s ex-girlfriend.

backpacker. Identity as a backpacker is achieved materially, socially, and discursively, and Rachel, as a resident of the hostel does not construct identity through the same semiotic resources, although she does have access to them. She instead constructs her identity in contrast to what a backpacker is. She used to backpack; now she does not. She used to party all the time when backpacking; now she shouldn't. She used to be on a permanent vacation when backpacking; now she has responsibilities, bills, and worries. Her political, social, and financial situation is construed as distinct from and perhaps dichotomous with that of the backpackers, but she is still able to contribute to the conversation about backpackers because of her experience "on the road." Her degree of cognitive distance from home is perhaps as great as that of other backpackers in that she has undertaken an adventure to another place, but she perceived herself now as stationary and attempting to get settled.

### **The necessity of travel**

To backpackers and travelers, the purpose and necessity of backpacking is self-evident. One travels not just for the experience of traveling and not just to construct a traveling self, but to come to a better sense of who one is in the world.

Rachel: But you know how New York is really uptight and it's, when you decide you're going to do something crazy like this you just have to do it. You can't think about it, you just gotta do it, otherwise you never will. My friends will live, grow up, and die on Long Island without ever probably seeing the world ever.

Benji: Yeah, they've never seen Bourbon Street.

Hurricane: Yeah, you need to see Bourbon Street at least once in your life.

Benji: I've never-I went to Vegas for ten nights and I didn't go to a strip club.

Benjamin equates "seeing the world" with seeing Bourbon Street, or rather, never seeing the world with never seeing Bourbon Street. While spoken facetiously, these comments point to several tenets of backpacking ideology. One is that there are places that you *have to* see in your

lifetime. Transformation through backpacking and understanding of this existential authenticity achieved on the trip cannot even be conveyed through narration; it must be experienced. Noy's article "You *Must* Go There" (italics in title) talks about such an idea as conveyed through persuasive discourse (2005). It also reveals Benjamin's understanding of "the world" as made up of note-worthy (and often notorious) locations on the backpacker route.

I asked self-identified traveler Rob, who had lived in Valparaiso, Chile for almost a year and then in different cities in Colombia for half a year, to comment on the following quote: "[T]he romantic tourist is digging his own grave if he seeks to evangelize others to his own religion" (Walter 1982:301). Rob and I had become close during the three weeks he lived in Bogotá, and I felt that I could challenge his assumptions without being rude. In fact, as a history major, journalist for an English-language online newspaper in Colombia, and admitted Colombian politics buff, Rob welcomed the heated debate, which went on for a full hour. Below is part of our exchange:

Rob: While I don't condone anyone evangelizing anything, I think traveling is one of the best things a person can do. It sheds ignorance, gives one a more nuanced worldview...making you a less self-centered, holier-than-thou person. It teaches you things that can only be learned by experience....I see nothing wrong in romanticizing travel. It *is* romantic. And if circumstances permit, it is a necessity, I'd say. Traveling, be it to Colombia, Spain, or Thailand, makes you a more well-rounded person. To borrow a phrase, "it's the journey not the destination"...traveling, getting outside your comfort zone, is something that I believe has few, if any, downsides.

Travel, for Rob, is a crucial element in character-building and is an absolute "necessity." He assumes that if circumstances (presumably economic) permit, everyone would want to travel and would be better off traveling. He conjures up the idea of comfort zone as something existing outside of one's own society, and travel as something that can break that barrier and lead to greater self-understanding. While travel makes a person less "holier-than-thought," he judges

those who have the opportunity to travel and to not do it. My response to Rob addresses his insistence on the inherent value of travel.

Emley: I think you prize your way of meaning-making and understanding of the world through living abroad, and while I value the same things as you, I recognize that there are a lot of other ways to understand the world and I don't give the primacy to living abroad that you do in your life narrative. We're just approaching this from different perspectives, where you keep trying to tell me that what you're doing is important and I keep telling you that yes, it is to *you*, but that there's no objective importance in living abroad in general. It's the value you place on it and what you chose to incorporate into that story. You don't tell people back home that all your friends in Colombia are English speakers and that you speak English 90% of your day because that's not what matters to you. What matters is that other 10%, which statistically doesn't seem like much, but those interactions with Colombians are what make it for you. Seeing new places isn't inherently positively transformational. Think about a tourist resort in Cancun that tends to reinforce pre-existing categories and stereotypes. Or processes where people have less agency in the matter: think slavery, *desplazamiento*,<sup>16</sup> forced migration...

Rob: I'm not prioritizing one way of learning over another....However, it is undeniable that living abroad gives you insight to people and cultures that you cannot get out of books or talking to other people who have been there or have first-hand knowledge. Whereas I gained an appreciation for all things Latin America due to my area of study in school, they were expanded ten-fold by living here [in Colombia]...Traveling to me is far less about learning about other cultures as it is about learning about yourself....Traveling, like higher education, teaches you to be just a little less arrogant because it shows you that a lot of the things you took for certain turn out to be deluded and wrong. The purpose of education—and I'm talking about traveling and school here—is not knowledge accumulation, but giving you the tools to deem what has importance and what doesn't.

Travel's pedagogy rings with the fundamental Boasian tenet of cultural relativism, but missing is the element of social critique, as it does not teach about inequality, distribution of wealth and power, and human rights. However, Rob is indignant that I would deny that travel could be anything but wholly educational and necessary because he sees it as a moral and intellectual imperative, making the traveler a better and smarter person. Details about quotidian life in a local place that would not be taught in a classroom necessarily have inherent value, and education—which includes travel—rather redundantly allow one to understand the importance of

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<sup>16</sup> displacement

education through travel. In addition to being educational, travel is a heuristic to understand and process information.

Instead of locating the value of travel in the sensuous and the phenomenological, like the backpacker, he sees travel as more of an internal journey that is not completely dependent on the experience in local place, i.e. less “about the destination” and “less about learning about local cultures.” Travel itself is education, and it “changes one’s suppositions” and makes one “less arrogant” (despite the fact that he claims to be an expert on Colombia) and the true self learned through travel grants a sense of local place.

My interview with Matt and Bruce, two “travelers” living around Colombia for seven months, suddenly became very tense when I asked them to define what a backpacker was and what they thought they were. These two individuals were staying in the hostel’s small efficiency apartment down the street for a month as they got their English-language teaching certification, the two would spend a lot of their free time in the hostel, and they came on three Saturday party buses that I organized, yet when I implied that they could be backpackers, they both became extremely defensive, and Matt explained to me why they were not backpackers.

Matt: Because we’re just happen to be foreigners living in a spot, we’re not here for the sole purpose of personal—it’s not just—we’re not here just to take fucking pictures and shit. We have jobs here, there’s a responsibility. When I think backpacking you have no ties to anybody else you’re just kind of on your own whimsical kind of adventure.

Matt’s barbed comments contain a critique about how he sees backpacking as compared to what he is doing as a traveler living in Colombia. Backpacking, in his mind, is self-indulgent, a “whimsical kind of adventure” solely for pleasure that dodges many of the import responsibilities of modern life that make one a rounded individual. The traveler, on the other hand, is part of a local economic and social system through jobs and



relationships and does not experience local places merely by visual consumption. Matt's derogatory way of referring to picture taking, immediately after cutting himself off from commenting on the self-centered selfishness of backpacking, demonstrates the traveler's resentment to the backpackers claims to authenticity as he hastily refers to them with the same tropes of the camera-laden, Hawaiian shirt clad tourist only seeing tourist(y) sites through the lens of a camera.

Backpackers also express this ambivalence about technologies of memory and the gaze through a camera lens.

It feels like an invasion of privacy. Someone's getting their hair cut or their shoes shined and I just walk up and am like 'click.' If someone did that to me I'd be like, 'Um, hey dude, what's up.' It feels even weirder if you're in like Cuba or Africa or some shit. Like, "Oh look, an impoverished child. You're so poor it's cute. I'm going to take a picture of you so rich people in some coffee shop can drink lattes and look at a picture of you with flies on your face. —Taylor, USA; Hostal Sue, November 2012.

Taylor comments on capturing quotidian moments in the lives of people in the countries that he is visiting and acknowledges that the gaze is exoticizing. However, Taylor says that despite feeling sheepish about the pictures he takes sometimes, this has never stopped him from taking pictures while traveling.

In my conversation with Matt and Bruce, they set up a spectrum with tourists at one end, travelers at the other, and backpackers in the middle but sliding between the two poles. A traveler's main traits are rootedness and seriousness, living a life in a different country instead of searching for that existential travel bliss feeling.

Matt: Like, to me, it's like I don't want to be associated with people who did that stuff because that's not what I did and it was significant to me and so I wouldn't want people to get a different impression of what I actually did. Because it's a transformative or significant event in my life, it's important that people really know what I did... I don't want them to think that I was just *rafting* every day.

Matthew stresses that what he is doing in Colombia is serious and important, as opposed to what a backpacker does. The “rafting” he pejoratively refers to is a synthesis of all of his ideas about the free time backpackers have to do “extra-ordinary” activities that the average person with a job and responsibilities could not do on a daily basis. “Rafting” is emblematic of the “fun” that backpackers say motivates their travel, but Matt strips the fun of the profound significance and transformational power it can have for the backpacker, instead calling the life he lived in Colombia “transformative” and “significant.”

### **“To know,” “to live,” and “to understand”**

Over and over again in the speech of the travelers, travelers draw a distinction between backpackers, who only *see* a place but their engagement with a place does not extend beyond the visual and superficially experiential (“to see” and “to party”), and those travelers who “know” a place and understand it because they live there and have an emotional and pragmatic connection with it. Cognitive and psychological engagement, according to Matthew and Bruce, comes from the amount of time spent living the same type of life one would live back home. The camera, a technology of memory, is used to compulsively capture images of a multiple places, while the traveler, who lives in one place, does not feel the same impulse because he intuitively “knows” a place.

Matthew: You’re there for short bursts of time and you’re trying to do everything in a short amount of time which kind of entails that you do this mile wide inch deep, and on one side of things the associations are do a bunch of drugs and go out and party all the time, the other time you think of walking around with a camera taking pictures of everything and then repeat in the next city. Bruce and I had a priority on going deep into a place; a backpacker in my definition of a backpacker, puts more of an emphasis on ‘how much can I see in a block of time,’ like, literally different places, where Bruce and I how much can we get **to know** and **understand** a place, a single place, rather than see a bunch of places.

Bruce: You're **doing pretty much what you would do anywhere**, you just happen to be in this one spot.

Knowing and understanding a place has been the hallmark of anthropology and ethnographic fieldwork. Despite anthropology's disdain of tourists, which could have stemmed from resentment for the fact that they felt tourists were encroaching on their so-called unexplored territory, anthropologists have been compared to tourists in academic literature (Dumont 1977; van den Berghe 1980; Boon 1982; Hamilton 1982; Crick 1985). To come full circle, backpacker tourists consider themselves as amateur anthropologists, immersing themselves in another culture, learning the language, and trying to come to a broader understanding of the way the world works. After explaining armchair anthropology to Matthew, he said it sounded like what backpackers do now with their grand proclamations of having discovered essential and ultimate truth about a place or a people without actually engaging with. In the above conversation he lays claim to the same goal; however, he sees the traveler's methodology as being unique to that of the backpackers. Instead of seeing multiple places, the traveler lives one place, and thus the traveler's claims to understanding of local place are not lofty, but are verified by daily experiences, each of which reinforces this knowledge.

Bruce says that he and Matthew just happen to be living a life in another country, yet they adopt the title "traveler," versus, say "ex-pat" or choosing not to self-identify by one of those categories. The label "traveler," then, has a certain ideology attached to it which is revealed through Matthew and Bruce's discourse. To know and understand a place allows the traveler not just to draw larger conclusions about the local but allows them to better understand themselves. This introspection and ultimate transformation is achieved not through experiential fun or ravenous visual consumption of new places every day, but through, as they understand it, enmeshing themselves in local economic,

social, and cultural webs. “Traveling” is as much a commentary on backpacking as backpacking is on tourism.

### **A traveler’s backpacking trip**

When I spoke with Bruce, he was two weeks away from a two month-long backpacking trip through Central America. His and Matthew’s comments work to devalue backpacking, establish what it means to be a traveler, and assert that backpacking does not taint Bruce’s experience of getting to know and understand Colombia.

Emley: [to Bruce] So you’re about to go backpacking through Central America, right?

Bruce: Ha, yeah, **change of lifestyle**.

Matthew: About to become a **douchebag** in about a week.

Bruce: Exactly.

Matthew: Like I don’t think the fact that Bruce is doing this for however many weeks like negates the fact that he was doing *this* Like, I don’t think you are what you did most recently. You can still call Bruce a traveler and not a backpacker even though he’s going to be backpacking for like three weeks.

Bruce: So I’ve kind of thought about this a little bit over the last couple weeks, too, cuz I don’t necessarily want to do that “every two days go to a new spot” thing so I’m planning on picking a few places for the next two months and staying there for a week or so, you know, try to get to know it more than like see the tourist hot spots or like the local thing that the hostel recommends and then, you know, go and do whatever after that and go to the next place and do it all over again.

Bruce, instead of staying in each stop along his route through Central America back to the States like a backpacker would, by his estimation, he plans on staying a week, believing that in those extra days he can get a more complete understanding of local culture than a backpacker would be able to.

Travelers take offense at backpackers' "fun," and they do not see the personal work that the fun is achieving. They look more externally for verification of their authenticity, focusing on local dwelling, interactions with locals, and a job<sup>17</sup>. They see the backpacker fun as a selfish endeavor, and not an introspective one. Yet travelers and backpackers are searching for the same feeling of authenticity, but the locus of the spark lies in different modes of dwelling for each. Social relations but with locals, not backpackers; living not seeing, knowing not documenting, quality not quantity.

My interview with the American travelers in Colombia reveals the significance of group categories for a person's identity. To be misidentified or miscategorized is offensive for these travelers, who had worked hard to "know" a place in a way they did not see backpackers doing. They had very specific ideas of what a traveler did and what a backpacker did, and they did not want to be confused with "douchebag" backpackers. The backpacker and the traveler both wish to make very clear to observers and interlocutors what it is that they are doing and accomplishing in order to distinguish themselves from members of another identity category. The similarities of group membership created among members, and this sameness is set up as a way to delineate themselves from members of a different group. This is most clearly seen in the speech of the travelers, who construct their identity in near-opposition to how they see a backpacker. The label becomes polemical and political, and underscores the importance of identity formation for the individual and for the study of identity within the social sciences.

### **Final thoughts**

The backpackers on party bus hurtling along the highway never asked me about the neighborhoods that we were driving through. When we stopped at the lookout point, the

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<sup>17</sup> Even working for multinational corporations, writing for English-language online-only newspaper based in Colombia was considered holding a local job.

expanse of lights alone cannot communicate the dangerous zones of the city where people displaced by the civil war—who have suffered horrible losses and lived atrocities—have been resettled, where they are now vulnerable to neighborhood violence and natural disaster in these peripheral, mountainside areas. The backpacker who gets pickpocketed in a nightclub would find it difficult to see that act neither either solitary and unlucky nor typical of a dangerous South American large city, but instead as part of systemic violence and inequality that trouble the capital and the country as a whole. What would the “real Bogotá” be? This is a question that is becoming more and more challenging for residents of the city, who find it difficult to say they know their city anymore. Levels of homelessness have risen, personal insecurity is a part of everyday life, and distrust of strangers is the common currency of social interaction. Almost a million new residents who have suffered unspeakable violence at the hands of the military, guerillas, and paramilitaries try to establish a new life in the city using the few resources provided to them by the government.

Yet backpackers claim to know Bogotá after spending an average of a few days in the city. Although this could read like a harsh critique of the backpacker claim to authenticity, I rather mean it as a resounding emphasis on the relationship between identity formation and understanding of place. In the enclosed spaces of hostel and the party bus, backpackers live experiences and create stories about those experiences that are intensely personal and important to them, and because those experiences have taken place outside of the backpackers comfort zone, they inherently speak to the nature of the local place. The authenticity on the party bus is not staged by the hostel employees, for what would this authenticity be if there is nothing on display? Rather, the authenticity is created by the backpackers in the space provided to them through the social experience of drug use, drinking, dancing, and *communitas*.

Circumscribed spaces like the hostel and the bus are arenas where identities are constructed in the moment, but these spaces speak to a larger phenomenon. The hostel and its satellite bus are not just one locality, but is part of a linked network that creates and is created by backpackers. Millions of backpackers, a group of people laying claim to the same backpacking identity move from one hostel to another, and this network of hostels is the infrastructure for constructing global sense of identity. This particular manner of travel, and thus claim to identity, is only possible in the era of the internet with absolute connectivity, online booking, Facebook bragging, and virtual network that intersects with the global geography of the hostels and the web of social interactions constructed within.

To call backpackers “existential tourists,” as I do in this thesis, is not to deny the possibility of meaning-making—both in understanding of self and of local place—to other tourists. Yet because of backpackers’ insistent claims to real, true, and authentic experiences, I have primarily focused on their process of phenomenologically authenticating self and constructing meaning on their trips. Through discourse analysis, I have shown the common features of the backpacking trip, backpacker category, and backpacking ethos in order to elucidate backpacking culture and the active social construction of backpacker identity. This investigation has also revealed the larger process of identity construction as a semiotic and linguistic process of culturally positioning social subjects. Backpackers are able to boldly lay claim to authenticity to local place—especially as they see themselves in relation to more (by their categorization) mainstream mass tourists—through the feeling of an authentic self that arises through backpacking tourism. This sense of self is developed through intense “fun” experiences both within and outside the hostel, and through speech within the hostel about those

experiences. I have also shown “traveling” as a critique of backpacking just as backpacking is a critique of mainstream tourism.

The broader implications of this study show the role of the hostel in providing a physical and conceptual space for the creation of backpacking culture and individual backpacker identity. Moving forward, it is imperative that anthropological studies of tourism focus more on bodily sensations in the tourist experience (Hannam and Knox 2010), and not just on the presence of these sensations, but also on what role those sensations play in the formation and negotiation of cultural and individual identity. The phenomenological authentication of self through travel experiences and performance of narratives that develops within the hostel grants the backpacker the authority to claim authenticity of the local because of the experiences that happen there.



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## **Vita**

Emley Kerry graduated from Louisiana State University with an undergraduate degree in International Studies and a minor in Spanish. Unbeknownst to her at the time, Emley's undergraduate thesis on Japanese existential flamenco tourism as well as her backpacking travels through Central and South America would set the course of her future graduate studies. After completing her Master's Degree at Louisiana State University, she will be moving to Oxford, England spend too much time being existential until beginning a Ph.D. program in the fall of 2014 at an undecided university. Her future research interests include undocumented US-Mexico border crossings, undocumented migration, and the phenomenology of illegality. She has also begun an anthropological inquiry into the as-yet-undiagnosed (possible) neurological disorder known as ASMR, or Autosomatic Sensory Meridan Response, as a system of perception and feeling that destabilizes western epistemological understanding of sensory experience.

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