

Temporariness, belonging, and the mobile body: Exploring seasonal agricultural workers' experiences in a regional Australian community

Author: Esther Anderson, esther.anderson@usq.edu.au

Institution: University of Southern Queensland

Abstract: Seasonal labour is integral to regional Australian social structures and has considerable significance for the maintenance of the agriculture industry. Seasonal labour is partially sustained by place- and industry-based migration schemes, which contribute to the maintenance of dynamic and diverse regional areas. Transient labour populations and regional communities continue to be mutually interdependent, but this relationship is made complex through narratives of stability and belonging that become embedded in the local space. Within employment contexts, the seasonal worker exists temporarily, but the need for their labour is more permanent. This economic focus limits the possibility for workers to become part of the community in a more social sense, creating a regional space understood through frameworks of stasis and exclusion. The temporal and spatial conditions that structure individual experiences of seasonal labour, transience, and temporary migration limit the performances of everyday life to marginal social spaces. The seasonal worker also contrasts understandings of a fixed, stable regional identity by moving through space in a seemingly unattached way.

In addressing these issues, this paper uses the mobile body to explore the state of being 'local', which assumes that belonging necessitates a deep, long-term personal connection with regional space. This paper forms part of a PhD research project focusing on sites in regional south-east Queensland, Australia where seasonal workers, farmers, and long-term residents intersect. Broader themes of temporality, migrancy, mobility and belonging touch on the exploitation of temporary migrant workers recently revealed Australian media discourse.

Temporariness, belonging, and the mobile body: Exploring seasonal agricultural workers' experiences in a regional Australian community

Introduction

Temporary migrants or backpackers are connected to regional Australian communities through specific conditions attached to temporary visas. Temporary migration visas in Australia are intended to facilitate cultural exchange and simultaneously respond to perceived unskilled labour shortages found in agricultural industries (Allon, Anderson & Bushell 2008, p. 82; Argent & Tonts 2013, p. 149). The 'working holiday' visa (subclass 417) allows its recipient to stay in Australia for a maximum of one year; to apply for a second visa the individual must undertake three months' (88 days) work in specific industries, including seasonal agricultural labour throughout regional Australia (IMMI 2015). Agriculture-rich regions requiring a short-term labour force can be displaced from tourist centres; both in terms of physical distance and perceived shared community attitudes surrounding belonging and temporariness. Working holiday makers (commonly also referred to as 'backpackers') are predominantly seen as regional economic assets when employed, rather than individuals or tourists contributing to a diverse socio-cultural milieu. While the working holiday visa is designed for travel and *incidental* labour as a means to fund and lengthen a holiday (Reilly 2015, p. 2), employment is perceived differently by backpackers, farmers and long-term residents in seasonal work locations. This paper will draw out the temporal discordance that is present in travel and work spheres for backpackers and consider the mechanisms that structure mobility and time for working holidaymakers, farmers and the region more broadly.

In agriculture-rich regions providing seasonal labour, mobility can contrast with existing ideas of a stable regional identity (see Dufty-Jones 2014, p. 369; Lobo 2015). Temporariness in this sense is marked as a 'condition' or 'status' that conflates notions of connection (Cresswell 2006, p. 26), legitimacy and the authority to claim ownership over a space (Massey 1994, p. 151). The mobile body offers a way of understanding the state of being 'local', which assumes that belonging necessitates a deep, long-term personal connection with space (Gustafson 2009; Lippard 1997, p. 42; Lockie & Bourke 2001, p. 9). Stability is

perceived as being a key element of belonging in regional space and also comes to form a conceptual anchor for this study.

This article is drawn from ongoing fieldwork that began in March 2016 and engages with backpackers undertaking seasonal agricultural labour, farmers and more long-term residents. Research takes place in the Lockyer Valley, an agriculture-rich region in south-east Queensland, Australia. The region has an approximate population of 35,000 people, occupies over 2,000 square kilometres, and is situated 1.5 hours' drive away from the nearest capital city (Brisbane). Time is spent across multiple sites of interaction across the broader area, including farms and public space. This particular region was previously almost exclusively known for potato and onion production, however its fruit and vegetable crops are now considerably more varied and contribute significantly to the local economy, to the extent that it is referred to as a 'national salad bowl'. Planting and harvesting takes place year-round and peak demand for labour brings heightened numbers of working holidaymakers to the area from approximately April to September each year. I will structure my discussion around arrivals, labour and departures, considering perceptions of *wasted* time or valuable uses of time.

Arrivals

For working holiday makers, the temporal conditions attached to visas can actively produce the potential for exploitation and exclusion. A sense of uncertainty associated with arrival in potential employment locations can heighten the likelihood of employment-based vulnerability. Government-produced guides, online message boards or place-centred social media (see Backpacker Job Board 2016; Harvest Trail 2015) provide some (although often vague and unreliable) information regarding the likelihood of employment, rates of pay and working conditions. In many instances, working holidaymakers rely on word-of-mouth and often arrive in potential employment locations without work confirmed (Jarvis & Peel 2013, p. 121). In the region, the caravan park is the first point-of-call for employment inquiries. Apart from privately rented share houses, hostels, or contractor-owned accommodation, the caravan park is the largest regional accommodation provider in the region. These forms of accommodation can distance working holidaymakers from the wider community, being

identified as spaces occupied by the transient agricultural workforce to the exclusion of most other identities. Some holiday makers prioritise visiting the visitor information centre, however this arm of local government then directs enquirers towards the caravan park, effectively removing possible official connections to ‘unscrupulous contractors or employers’ (see Commonwealth of Australia 2016, p. 169; Queensland Parliament 2016). Travelling without tangible knowledge presents a significant risk for working holidaymakers wanting to apply for a second year visa: time can be *wasted* looking for work. It is worth reiterating here that a successful second year visa application requires 88 days of employment within the working holiday maker’s first year. I met Marco (Italy) while picking figs:

‘I was in [nearby town] for one month waiting for work, but there was none. So I wasted a month when I could have been working here, getting money and getting my days.’

I came across similar stories meeting backpackers at a soup kitchen held at a church in town. The event was initially developed to provide for residents of low socio-economic status; the organisers did not expect to attract 150 backpackers (most staying at the caravan park) each week come peak planting and harvesting season. A number of attendees spoke of having difficulty finding employment, which was confirmed by the event organiser: ‘it’s the influx of people, there’s not enough work at the moment. People find work eventually, but they’re left with the dregs’. This deeply felt social and economic influence of seasonality and population influx echoes other assertions that “seasonality is more marked in peripheral destinations than in urban centres” (Charles-Edwards & Bell 2015, p. 103). In addition, it appears as though the transient workforce is seen to have a responsibility within the region to accept less attractive employment, creating further distance between backpackers and long-term residents. As such, finding farm work through labour hire contractors is increasingly common (Underhill & Rimmer 2015, p. 8). Contractors known to be unscrupulous are seen to utilise a number of methods to control backpackers’ time and increase reliance on the contractor, extending the length of their temporary workforce. Often, payslips are not provided on time (or at all), contractors hold off on ‘signing off’ on an employee’s second year visa application, or work provided is cash-in-hand (tax-free/unregulated) (Commonwealth of Australia 2016; Queensland Parliament 2016). ‘Days versus time’ becomes a common theme in backpackers’ discussions. Lena (Germany) had

recently arrived in town after a sore back limited her access to work in another nearby town. She explained that she needed to get 40 days' of work (of her 88) while only having 60 days remaining on her first year visa. Her contractor, however, was unresponsive to her needs and offered better work to other backpackers under her employ. I met Lena by chance at a grocery store weeks later; her situation remained the same, but she 'has a good feeling that it's going to get better'. In this instance, wasted time is not perceived as valuable as it is incongruous with the goal of gaining seasonal employment that led the backpacker to the region. This focus on employment also limits working holidaymakers' ability to undertake non-work activities, such as sightseeing.

Without having this knowledge of good or bad experiences prior to arrival in a potential employment location, working holidaymakers are left increasingly vulnerable by the need to engage in precarious employment. Throughout their travels backpackers are highly spatially mobile and have a fluid sense of time; many describe following a leisurely path up Australia's east coast (Hanson & Bell 2007, p. 102; Loker-Murphy & Pearce 1995, p. 819; Peel & Steen 2007, p. 1059) prior to 'settling' at intervals for work. However, this exploitation of time often stemming from arrival in a potential work location puts them at a standstill.

Labour

Working holidaymakers' experiences with seasonal agricultural labour vary considerably, even within a relatively contained geographical area. Some work six days per week, while others wait for a text message each night to confirm irregular work. At peak harvesting season larger farms in the region often operate 24 hours a day, with many workers packing vegetables on night shift and returning home while it is still dark. Crop seasonality creates strict schedules that wait for no-one, and farmers are left to hastily arrange or dissolve labour forces as required. In these contexts, *who* does the work is of lesser importance than the speed to which the work (e.g. planting, picking, or packing produce) is completed. Seasonality is not the only factor influencing the fast-paced nature of the peak season, as some farmers negotiate contracts with Australian supermarket chains. For these reasons, the transient nature of the working holiday visa turns backpackers into a somewhat

expendable economic resource. As stated by an employee at the regional visitor information centre, 'they're [backpackers] only here for work; definitely a commodity', an idea that appears to be shared by backpackers themselves, farmers and long-term residents in the region. As with many regional areas across Australia, seasonal labour is able to sustain agricultural industries (Tan & Lester 2012, p. 360). A number of backpackers confirmed that the area offered two main benefits; first, the possibility of work, and second, a lack of costly tourist experiences. Olivia (Canada), Marie and Louise (France) spoke of their typical weekend activities: 'sometimes we go to the beach, but usually we go to Coles [grocery store] or we relax and smoke. We [Marie and Louise] don't have a car, so there is nowhere to go and it is a good way to save money'. When staying in place for extended periods of time, backpackers' everyday routines, activities (cf. Allon & Anderson 2010, p. 17) and everyday purchases (cf. Peel & Steen 2007, p. 1057) are likely to be similar to that of more permanent residents. While backpackers with access to viable transport choose to travel on their days off, often to nearby cities with greater tourist attractions, these experiences are structured around employment. Regardless of employment or visa status, temporariness, mobility and stability are all interwoven throughout daily life (Rajkumar et al. 2012, p. 484).

Perhaps it is the combined elements of incidental travel and temporariness that partially inspires backpackers to adopt a fluid approach to work, workplace dis/satisfaction and perceived valuable uses of time while based in regional locations. In this instance, a lack of reliance on one particular work location and the knowledge that employment opportunities are available elsewhere creates movement and fluidity (Clarke 2004, p. 417). I met Ali (England) at the soup kitchen, after he had spent a long day cutting heads of broccoli: 'the farmer...he thinks I'm not interested and that he's [his friend] too slow. Does he think that I'm here to further my broccoli-cutting career?'

Others choose to be more playful, embracing how distinct their newfound temporary roles were from their identities at home. One backpacker jokingly introduced himself to me as 'Daan, from the Netherlands. Professional lettuce picker'. However, one farmer was frustrated by the lack of seriousness applied to employment by some working holidaymakers:

‘All staff go through an induction before they’re even allowed on the farm that none of us [management] have time for. Last year, we had people do their induction, do 20 minutes work then walk off and not come back.’

This theme of time management and perceived valuable uses of time was brought up by other farmers, emphasising that regardless of the crop, negotiating seasonality, a transient workforce, and catering to the supply chain requires precise engineering and organisation at every turn. Workplace dis/satisfaction also speaks to a broader debate relating to workplace exploitation, industry regulation and rates of pay that goes well beyond the scope of this discussion. These issues are the topic of recent expository documentaries (ABC 2015) and ongoing federal and state government inquiries (Commonwealth of Australia 2016; Queensland Parliament 2016). Linking labour practices to a temporal discordance between working holidaymakers, farmers and long-term residents highlights how the above issues sprawl beyond work spaces and into the minutiae of everyday life.

Departures and conclusions

Discussing impending or potential departures with working holidaymakers continues to draw out themes of place attachment, belonging, mobility and agency. With a number of backpackers in the region taking advantage of the peak planting and harvesting season, motivations influencing departures are expected to continue unfolding throughout the course of fieldwork. Drawing from Ingold’s theory of lines and traces (2007, p. 43; 2015), the act of movement (and departure) reveals intimate connections; to people and places within and beyond a single location. These ‘occupational communities’ (Thulemark 2016) are thought to be positively strengthened over time through shared social and work experiences. Indeed, some departures in the region appear to hinge on positive networks with other backpackers. Ali (England) had built a network of friends within the caravan park also from England, but was dissatisfied with the work and with the small town lifestyle:

‘Broccoli...it’s s**t...and there’s nothing to do here...I’m from London...it’s just so quiet here. I’m leaving in two weeks; I will have done 22 days by then so I’ll just finish the rest off in Darwin. I have a friend already there.’

Ali did not seem to consider his time in the region to be wasted, but felt that it could be used *better*, while still connecting with friends elsewhere; despite a distance of over 3000 kilometres between his current employment and Darwin. With freedom of transport and plenty of time in which to obtain the remaining days for his second year visa, departure (for Ali) was a valid, effective response. For others, friendships kept them in place, or at least strongly impacted on their decision-making processes and justified remaining in place regardless of their feelings towards agricultural labour or the region. Winston (Taiwan) lived in a share house and had also built a large group of friends in the area (also backpackers):

‘I went to Melbourne to interview for a permanent job. 9-5, Monday to Friday. If I go, I’ll lose all my friends here. If I stay, I’ll earn less money. If I go, I can’t have regrets either because I will have spent money on processing the different visa. That’s a lot of money for me.’

Stories of arrival, work, and departure vary considerably between working holidaymakers, highlighting that there is no ‘typical’ backpacker identity. The importance of backpackers’ social networks also disrupts the notion of belonging in place as determined by length of residence. With fieldwork still ongoing, it will be interesting to see how the conditions that structure working holiday makers’ everyday lives reproduces the temporal discordance between travel and work spheres. From arrival, to employment and departure, temporariness impacts on backpackers and farmers (although in different ways). As the need for greater numbers of transient workers in the region dissolves in late August to September, it is anticipated that departures will be able to be more greatly understood as seasonality impacts upon backpackers’ decisions. When working holidaymakers become regional economic assets, they may experience difficulty in accessing alternate identities and become temporally and spatially distanced from many aspects of regional social life. Backpackers become part of a social network amongst other seasonal workers with shared living or employment experiences. For more long-term residents, working holidaymakers are a transient resource that does not permeate existing ideas of ‘home’ and belonging, despite their significant contribution to the local economy. This temporal discordance, however, creates meaningful connections with other backpackers through shared experience, which can influence decision-making practices and perceived logical responses to dis/satisfaction.

References

Slaving Away 2015, ABC, Ultimo, New South Wales. Directed by ABC.

Allon, F & Anderson, K 2010, 'Intimate encounters: The embodied transnationalism of backpackers and independent travellers', *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 11-22, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/psp.574>>.

Allon, F, Anderson, K & Bushell, R 2008, 'Mutant Mobilities: Backpacker Tourism in 'Global' Sydney', *Mobilities*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 73-94, <<http://ezproxy.usq.edu.au/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=28605137&site=ehost-live>>.

Argent, N & Tonts, M 2013, 'A multicultural and multifunctional countryside? International labour migration and Australia's productivist heartlands', *Population, Space and Place*.

Backpacker Job Board 2016, *Jobs for Backpackers in Australia*, Backpacker Job Board, viewed 18 May, <<http://www.backpackerjobboard.com.au/>>.

Charles-Edwards, E & Bell, M 2015, 'Seasonal Flux in Australia's Population Geography: Linking Space and Time', *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 103-23, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/psp.1814>>.

Clarke, N 2004, 'Mobility, fixity, agency: Australia's working holiday programme', *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 10, no. 5, pp. 411-20, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/psp.347>>.

Commonwealth of Australia 2016, *A national disgrace: The Exploitation of temporary work visa holders*, Canberra, <http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/temporary_work_visa/Report>.

Cresswell, T 2006, *On the move: Mobility in the modern Western world*, Routledge, New York.

Dufty-Jones, R 2014, 'Rural economies in the 'Age of Migration': Perspectives from OECD countries', *Geography Compass*, vol. 8, no. 6, pp. 368-80, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12130>>.

Gustafson, P 2009, 'Mobility and territorial belonging', *Environment and behavior*, vol. 41, no. 4, pp. 490-508, <<http://eab.sagepub.com/content/41/4/490.abstract>>.

Hanson, J & Bell, M 2007, 'Harvest trails in Australia: Patterns of seasonal migration in the fruit and vegetable industry', *Journal of rural studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 101-17, <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016706000301>>.

Harvest Trail 2015, *Harvest Trail - Harvest Jobs - Australian JobSearch*, Commonwealth of Australia, viewed 13 May, <<https://jobsearch.gov.au/harvesttrail/>>.

IMMI, *Working Holiday visa (subclass 417)*, 2015, Department of Immigration and Border Protection, Australian Government, Canberra, Australia, <<http://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Visa-1/417->>.

Ingold, T 2007, *Lines: a brief history*, Routledge, London, <<http://ezproxy.usq.edu.au/login?url=http://site.ebrary.com/lib/unisouthernqld/Doc?id=10176293>>.

Ingold, T 2015, *The Life of Lines*, Routledge, London.

Jarvis, J & Peel, V 2013, 'Tourists for hire: International working holidaymakers in a work based destination in regional Australia', *Tourism Management*, vol. 37, no. 0, pp. 114-24, <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S026151771200194X>>.

Lems, A 2014, 'Placing displacement: Place-making in a world of movement', *Ethnos*, pp. 1-23, viewed 2015/06/15, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2014.931328>>.

Lippard, LR 1997, *The lure of the local: senses of place in a multicentered society*, New Press, New York.

Lobo, M 2015, 'Gestures of judgement and welcome in public spaces: hypervisible migrant newcomers in Darwin, Australia', *Journal of Cultural Geography*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 54-67, viewed 2015/05/11, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2015.1005881>>.

Lockie, S & Bourke, L 2001, 'Rural Australia: An introduction', in S Lockie & L Bourke (eds), *Rurality bites: the social and environmental transformation of rural Australia*, Pluto Press, Annandale NSW, ch 1, pp. 1-13.

Loker-Murphy, L & Pearce, PL 1995, 'Young budget travelers: Backpackers in Australia', *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 22, no. 4, pp. 819-43, <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0160738395000260>>.

Massey, DB 1994, *Space, place, and gender*, Polity Press, Minneapolis.

Peel, V & Steen, A 2007, 'Victims, hooligans and cash-cows: media representations of the international backpacker in Australia', *Tourism Management*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 1057-67, <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261517706001439>>.

Queensland Parliament 2016, *Inquiry into the practices of the Labour Hire Industry in Queensland*, Queensland Parliament, viewed 17 May, <<https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-committees/committees/FAC/inquiries/current-inquiries/I5-LabourHire>>.

Rajkumar, D, Berkowitz, L, Vosko, LF, Preston, V & Latham, R 2012, 'At the temporary–permanent divide: how Canada produces temporariness and makes citizens through its security, work, and settlement policies', *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3-4, pp. 483-510, viewed 2015/05/31, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2012.683262>>.

Reilly, A 2015, 'Low-cost labour or cultural exchange? Reforming the Working Holiday visa programme', *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, <<http://elr.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/08/07/1035304615598160.abstract>>.

Tan, Y & Lester, LH 2012, 'Labour market and economic impacts of international working holiday temporary migrants to Australia', *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 359-83.

Thulemark, M 2016, 'Community Formation and Sense of Place – Seasonal Tourism Workers in Rural Sweden', *Population, Space and Place*, pp. n/a-n/a, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/psp.2018>>.

Underhill, E & Rimmer, M 2015, 'Layered vulnerability: Temporary migrants in Australian horticulture', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 0, no. 0, pp. 1-19, <<http://jir.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/09/03/0022185615600510.abstract>>.