Managing Time and Making Space: Canadian Students’ Motivations for Study in Australia

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the ways in which Canadian students on an exchange or study abroad programme in Australia articulated the value of their experience in connection with time and, more particularly, time constraints. Where Canadian universities often promote study abroad programmes in connection with the global knowledge-based economy, students’ desires to travel abroad were more often rooted in a desire to take ‘time out’ while remaining productive towards the completion of future goals. Students’ narratives reveal a connection between time management, travel, and the formations of a class identity. Rather than analysing time strictly as a form of capital, however, insights are generated around time as practice, that is, how time becomes an important factor in students’ continual negotiations of space, social relationships, and what could be called a ‘lifetime itinerary’.

KEYWORDS: class, exchange, study abroad, time management practices, travel

Introduction

Studying abroad is exhibited on university websites across Canada as a ‘life altering experience’, one in which students will be transformed not only in the context of foreign university classrooms, but also as a result of having to forge new relationships, learn a new language, and adapt to a different culture. Students’ own motivations to study abroad, however, do not necessarily correspond to these claims. By examining the narratives of Canadian students undertaking an exchange or study abroad programme in Australia, this paper will discuss the ways in which students envision their experience both within the framework of a long-term life plan as well as within the scope of more immediate concerns over how to negotiate the demands of social relationships, the pressures of a cyclical work-study routine, and a desire to ‘take a break’.

The narratives discussed here were taken from qualitative interviews, gathered during four and a half months of fieldwork based in Melbourne, Australia. A few interviews were also conducted with students attending universities in Sydney (N.S.W.) and Perth (W.A.). My research focussed on the experiences of Canadian university students who were in Melbourne completing part of their university education either as exchange students, international students, or as participants in a study abroad programme. In total, I interviewed 21 Canadian students, both male and female, whose ages ranged from 20 to 55. I also took part in orientation sessions and other events for international and exchange/study abroad students held by universities in the greater...
Melbourne area and spent time socializing and travelling throughout Australia with Canadians and other overseas students.

Student mobility diverges from the kinds of movement that are typically the subject of anthropological research: diasporic movements of specific ethnic groups, labour migration patterns of the economically disadvantaged, or groups such as refugees who have been forcefully and/or violently displaced from their homeland. Exchange and study abroad programmes are expensive, ranging anywhere between $3,000 and $5,000 CAD and for this reason, Canadian students who decide to complete part of their university education abroad tend to be relatively affluent. In the social sciences, issues related to the mobility of privileged groups have generally been limited to the literature on tourism (Cohen 1973; Rojek 1993; Urry 1990; Badone and Roseman 2004), although, a number of researchers have also focussed on labour migration undertaken by both the middle class and elites (Ong 1999; Bianchi 2000; Urry 2000; Amit 2002; Hannerz 2004).

Just as student mobility is an unconventional topic in anthropology, it also troubles conventional distinctions between tourism and migration, distinctions that are usually formulated according to motivations for travel, degree of participation in tourist infrastructures, length of stay, and destination choice. Within traditional frameworks, tourism is commonly associated with leisure because it is presumed to be undertaken during non-working time, is motivated by factors that do not include work (relaxation, pleasure, or break from routine), and is consumption driven (Urry 1990). Migration is often assumed to involve a long period of stay and to be motivated primarily by a desire to find employment. The fact that students may stay abroad for varying lengths of time, from a couple of weeks to several years, suggests that exchange and study abroad programmes can constitute a form of temporary migration. Exchange/study abroad students may, in some cases, choose to find their own apartment and to work part time to finance their stay. In some cases, international student mobility can be a first step towards permanent migration (Gibson 2005). While student mobility may involve work in the form of both study and in some cases full- or part-time employment, it is also motivated by desires for leisure and tourism. The students who participated in this study engaged in a number of tourist activities during their time in Australia – sight seeing, attending festivals, and taking bus tours to popular tourist sites. Many also intended to travel as back-packers throughout Australia and parts of Southeast Asia.

While back-packers and exchange/study abroad students tend to be the same age, are at a significant life juncture when they begin their travels, and are often from the middle or upper classes, there are several important distinctions between back-packers and overseas students that are worth noting. Among back-packers, the ability to travel for long periods of time with limited financial resources is seen as a ‘badge of honour’ that distinguishes ‘real travellers’ from naïve and superficial tourists (Pearce 1990; Bradt 1995). By comparison, Canadian exchange/study abroad students were surprisingly liberal with their funds. What one student referred to as a ‘spend now, pay later’ attitude was often justified in order to get the most out of a ‘once in a lifetime’ experience.

As the global back-packing infrastructure becomes more sophisticated, the ‘gap year’ has increasingly become institutionalised as ‘constructive time off’. Promotional websites for the gap year frame extended travel as a modern rite of passage, one which will assist youth in their personal development and life transitions either from high school to university, youth to adulthood, or even from one career to another. ‘Gapyear.com’, for example, frames back-packing as a ‘liminal’ (Turner 1969) space beyond the constraints of daily routines, personal obligations, and other structuring devices. ‘Gapyear.com’ and other similar sites offer the back-packing experience as a period
for self-exploration, which also affords time to contemplate the next step in one’s life course. However, the idea of ‘taking time out’ as a period of liminality does not adequately capture students’ experiences during study abroad programmes. The most popular time to undertake studies abroad is in the third year of a university programme. Students, therefore, continue their university studies and often become embedded in routines and obligations not unlike the ones they left at home: attending classes, part-time work, socializing with friends, and paying bills. What is interesting is that students often described experiencing a sense of freedom in the substitution of one set of structuring routines for another. As will become clear, Canadian students saw studying abroad as a means of temporarily dislocating from their everyday lives at home, rather than as a definitive break in the transition from youth to adulthood. Taking ‘time out’ without wasting time was just as important to Canadian students’ motivations to study in Australia as was the need to negotiate major life transitions or the desire for personal growth and self-transformation.

Popular destination choices for Canadian exchange/study abroad students are Western countries especially, the U.K., the United States, and Australia. The desire to travel to large cities in Western locations is an important distinguishing characteristic between student mobility and back-packing. Youths who decide to back-pack commonly show a preference for remote areas in non-Western locations which are believed to contain ‘authentic cultures’, greater challenges or risks for the traveller, and consequently more worthwhile and valuable experiences (Desforges 1998; Sørenson 2003). Where anti-tourism and a desire to travel ‘off the beaten track’ are often featured in the constructions of ‘a backpacker identity’ (Welk 2004), exchange/study abroad students did not articulate a strong sense of group identity with other overseas students and were not overly preoccupied with distinguishing themselves from other tourists.

For Canadian students who participated in my research, the value of travelling abroad was related more to the opportunities the experience afforded to manage time, rather than the particular qualities of an Australian education or Australian culture. Studying in Australia was seen as an efficient way to merge the domains of tourism, leisure, work, and education into a single travel experience. The merging of these activities was, however, combined with some very definite ideas about time constraints and spatial boundaries. Of particular significance are the ways in which students viewed studying abroad as a means to negotiate the tension between the need to ‘take a break’, while also feeling pressured to remain productive towards time-dependent goals. The next section will expand on the pressures students described within three broad dimensions of time: institutional, biological, and cultural.

Managing Time and Making Space

Universities in Canada often promote international travel through study abroad programmes as a means of preparing students for a global knowledge-economy. Within this framework, a period of time studying abroad is thought to equip students with the skills, abilities, and mind-set needed to deal with the realities of globalizing markets, greater job insecurity, and the likelihood of continual occupational mobility throughout their lives. The re-orientation of time in the context of the knowledge-economy has been alternatively conceived as ‘de-territorialization’ (Harvey 1989) – time is no longer so encumbered by space and distance, ‘flexibilization’ (Sennett 2002) – identities have become short and transitory in keeping with a new global division of labour and increasingly mobile work forces – and ‘de-synchronization’ (Urry 1994) – at any given moment people are organizing and using time in different ways. Similarly, Manuel Castells has argued that the decline of full time permanent employment
opportunities has contributed to a general condition of ‘social arrhythmia’ in which the biological life-cycle is no longer constructed according to social categories such as education, working time, and the right to retirement (2002: 475). The notion of ‘managing time’ has diverse meanings and implications among Canadian students. Contrary to Castells’s argument, social categories – particularly the family, education, and working time – were crucial considerations in students’ descriptions of how studying abroad was integrated within and helped to construct what could be called a ‘lifetime itinerary’.

Some students saw studying in Australia as an opportunity to gain control over time in order to negotiate the constraints imposed by institutions such as the university, and the anticipated demands that a family as well as a career would bring later in life. In these instances, an exchange or study abroad programme was seen as a last chance to organise a period of leisure. This was certainly expressed by Stephan4 (29) who worried that his future profession as a lawyer would signal the end of leisure time for the foreseeable future:

If I would have stayed back home, I would have worked the entire summer and then gone back to school and I would have worked the next summer, gone back to bar school, would have worked again. So by coming to Australia it gives me two months off that are really, like, completely off ... it's kind of a vacation at the same time from everything. I'm going to be travelling around Australia and New Zealand ... cause coming on exchange, I still have to go to school, I still have to work, but those two months [upon his return to Montreal after the exchange] are really going to be ... like the culmination of the entire exchange process, which is to have free time before I settle down for next ten or twelve years working.

Although Stephan had personal motives for wanting to leave home, going on exchange was also a strategic decision to disrupt the continual cycle of work and university study. More importantly, it provided him with the opportunity to organise a period of leisure upon returning home.

Travel as a means of suspending everyday life was not only framed in terms of time, but was also linked to a number of strategies for differentiating the spaces of ‘home’ and ‘away’. During my time in Australia students were actively engaged in putting up walls that would demarcate their short time in Australia from their everyday life at home. The meaning of ‘taking time out’ in this sense was connected to the spatial quality of ‘distance’. For some students ‘distance’ was described in literal terms as being ‘far away from home’ and this meant that Australia was an ideal destination because, to paraphrase Nathan (21) in one of our informal conversations, ‘it was as about as far away from home as you could get without coming back around’. Stephan and Fay (23), however, described ‘distance’ as a desire for social disconnection:

Stephan: I think I wanted to go away because... Let's just say there were things to think about in my personal life that I needed to be away from the people that I knew to be able to figure these things out.... You know, it has to do with my parents, it has to do with my girlfriend as well and family situation ... and sometimes I think the easiest way to think about something is to disconnect from your environment so that you're completely alone and you can sit down and not be distracted by something else or somebody else.... when you're back home you always have your routine, it's never too far from you, right. You're always doing something.

Fay: I recently got out of a pretty serious relationship and I was devastated for like two weeks.... I bounced back pretty fast, but I remember thinking what a great opportunity and a great time for me to start planning this.

As Torun Elsrud (1998) argues in her study of Swedish back-packers, a desire for ‘time-out’ need not only refer to clock-time and its relationship to a stressful daily routine, but may also refer to the act of removing oneself from a sense of duty and responsibility to others. Travelling, then, becomes a way of gaining
‘own time’ by removing oneself from contexts that induce a feeling of accountability for other peoples’ time (Elsrud 1998: 315). Hence, time may refer to the configuration of social relationships while also being a factor in the spatial demarcation of home and away, work and leisure, and university study. Students hoped that distance from their daily routines would afford them a space from which they could gather new perspectives on their personal lives, romantic relationships, career goals, or what they ultimately wanted out of life in the future. Since the purpose of the trip was to obtain a ‘free-space’ to think clearly on these issues, students were not looking for a ‘culture shock’. In fact, one of the reasons students chose Australia as a destination was that it facilitated distance from home while continuing to provide a degree of comfort in terms of language facility and cultural familiarity.

Occasionally, students spoke about feeling pressured to accumulate as many experiences as possible within what they perceived to be the restrictions posed by biological time. Several expressed a sense of urgency to travel while they were young. The value of international travel therefore was often linked to some fairly definite ideas about the appropriate time frames in which particular experiences should be undertaken. Often these time frames were measured in terms of age. Travelling after the age of 35, for example, was described as no longer being a justifiable activity because by that time one should have started a family, or at least settled into a career. Other students had very methodically planned out their future so they could negotiate a desire for travel with career goals and the biological limitations of starting a family. Mandy (24), for example, had a very meticulously organised plan, which incorporated travelling abroad, obtaining her degree, and establishing herself in a career, all scheduled around what she thought was the perfect window to have a baby.

I plan to finish my Ph.D. within the next three years, and then getting pregnant within my last year of my Ph.D., and then having the baby. We haven’t decided if we’ll have it in Australia or Canada yet. I really want it in Canada … so probably five years is finish my degree in three years, get pregnant because I want to have a baby before I open my own private practice … and I really want to have the kid in Canada because my mom’s there and I want that support … so probably get married in July 2007, then have a baby, finish my degree, and move back to Canada.

Studying abroad was also framed by students as a strategy for managing ‘cultural time’, which I have defined here as a constellation of norms and values that inform an individual’s perceptions about how much time one should spend on any single activity (acquiring a university degree, travelling abroad) and what one should have accomplished by a certain age. Cultural time is greatly influenced by the limitations both of institutional time and biological time, but, more importantly, cultural time is relationally perceived and constantly negotiated through students’ personal interactions and relationships. For example, Eric (23) told me that he wanted to do the trip primarily for personal reasons – he felt he needed to ‘grow as a person’. Eric described a desire for personal growth in connection with feelings of being left-out by his more mobile group of friends because he lacked their international travel stories.

I just got to university and, like I said, my friends … you know they went to France for the summer and this and that, and I just started hearing all these stories … and you got a lot of international kids there … and they had all these stories and I’m like – ‘Well I’ve lived in Vancouver my whole life’ – like, it just didn’t seem that cool. I knew travelling would be beneficial for me as a person, more than career wise or university wise, so that’s why I wanted to do it. I kinda wanted to, you know, grow as a person, I guess you could say.

The preoccupation with managing time in order to remain productive while travelling was one of the most interesting themes that
emerged from interviews with Canadian students. In many cases, wanting to remain productive was linked to a desire and sense of urgency not to ‘waste’ or ‘lose’ time in the process of crossing off all the items that were frequently listed on students’ lifetime itineraries: obtaining a university degree, international travel, getting married, finding a career, and starting a family. Derek (21) articulates this point of view rather succinctly:

I didn’t want to take a year off and just piss around and just have a holiday for a year, but this was kind of like, it is kind of like a holiday a bit. Like the time I’ve had here has been so much fun, but I’m also getting two semesters of uni that are going towards my degree.

An orientation to the future, particularly students’ conceptions of personal success and life fulfilment, underlay motivations for study abroad. From this perspective, studying abroad was part of a larger goal to see and do everything one could in a lifetime. Lee and Eric, for example, saw their exchange experience as one step in the realisation of a long-term life-plan to ‘have it all’.

Lee (22): I wanted to work for the Canadian government, I wanted to do something exciting … I guess you have plans when your expectations of something are kind of rigid. But then when you experience something and then your expectations turn upside-down and everything, then so does your plan, or so does my plan anyways. Like the more people I meet, the more people I talk to, the more experiences I have, the plan, you know, starts to get chipped away a little bit at a time as well. Maybe … I’m still at the selfish stage of my life. Yeah, where it’s all me, me, me – I want to do everything!

Eric: I kinda want it all and I want to do it all, so that’s kind of my motivation for travelling now and then going to law school – you know what I mean? So yeah, basically what I’m trying to do right now is stay single and travel while I can. Cause like when you’re 35 you can’t really go around and travel in hostels and stuff like that so … I kinda want everything out of life. So I want to be young and have fun now, travel, you know go do the hostelling thing. Do all that, and then still have the education and what not, get back to Vancouver, you know, work an office job and earn however much money and settle down with a family and kids and stuff like that.

Institutional time, such as the way universities organise the length of degree programmes, tends to be rigid, bureaucratically organised, and standardised. Cultural time, however, is likely to be subject to ongoing negotiation and transformation depending on one’s class, level of education, goals in life, social group, and perhaps even family traditions.

While parents were generally supportive of the decision to study abroad, a few students had encountered conflicts with friends and family members over differing notions of cultural time. Eric spoke about his father’s opinion that an exchange programme was a waste of time and money; it would mean Eric would take too long to acquire a university degree, which would also delay his entry into a career. While Eric clearly had several personal and social motivations for travel (the desire to grow as a person and to keep up with his friends), he also had to negotiate the value of going on exchange in order to get his father’s approval, especially since he needed his financial support:

Me and my dad got into a lot of arguments, mostly about money, the amount of money it cost, how long, you know, it would delay my degree and stuff like that. He didn’t like me doing it cause I’d have to take out student loans and stuff like that, so my dad wasn’t supportive at all … And one of my arguments with him was that I would get … like a different perspective on engineering … I was always telling my dad too that I’d end up working internationally as a civil engineer.

By appealing to the idea that the study abroad experience would ultimately be beneficial in terms of a career, Eric attempted to manage his own ideas of cultural time while negotiating his personal relationship with his father who Eric needed and, as he told me later, wanted,
to support his exchange experience as ‘time well spent’.

Cheryl (24) was one of the few students to articulate her decision to study overseas in terms of the pressure to find employment in the tough conditions of the Canadian labour market:

... a lot of my friends, they’re still looking for a job after graduating and getting their degree ... It was quite a struggle to get a job ... I used to send ten résumés a day for like a good month and a half and then I only got one job, so you can imagine ... and then I got laid off after six months.

In the light of her frustrating attempts to find work in Toronto, Cheryl’s need for a break and new experiences won out over the criticisms from friends and family about her decision to go to Australia to obtain her Master’s degree. Cheryl also spoke about the desire to combine leisure and productivity:

Even my parents didn’t want me to come here because the U.S. is right close by and there’s no scholarships. ... And they always used to tell me, you know, grass looks greener on the other side. So I was like, ok let me go see how green it is ... everyone in my family, even my friends were like that. They were like – ‘you’re not going to get much out of Australian education. Canadian work-force doesn’t value other degrees out of Canada or the U.S. much’. So people were really saying like – ‘don’t’. And I said ‘well, you know, I have a Canadian degree and I have Canadian experience, let’s see’. But what matters to me is that I wanted this long break, but at the same time, I didn’t want to just spend two years doing nothing just because I wanted to have a break ...

Where Veblen once defined ‘leisure’ as ‘... the non-productive consumption of time’ (1953: 45), Urry’s (1994) more contemporary concept of ‘rational recreation’ – the idea that leisure, like work, is organised and regulated according to time – is much more applicable for explaining the ways in which students’ organised their study abroad/exchange experience. By viewing study abroad programmes as forms of ‘productive-leisure’ (Chaplin 1999), the next section will describe in more detail how the uses of, and values attached to, time also relate to formations of class identity among Canadian students.

**Time Management and Class Identity**

International student mobility incorporates activities and motives for travel that blur the boundaries between spheres of work in terms both of study and paid employment as well as leisure such as eating out, visiting tourist sites, and participating in recreational activities. In tourism literature, there is a tendency to view forms of travel that combine aspects of both production and consumption as an indication of a kind of post-modern de-differentiation. Theorists who work from this standpoint argue that the rational categorisations and distinctions that contributed stability to the modern era – real/simulated, private/public, home/abroad, and work/leisure – no longer correspond to how individuals experience the world. Featherstone has described the blurring of these distinctions as the ‘aestheticization of everyday life’, which describes ‘the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society’ (1991: 66-67). This implies the growing significance of symbolic practices for which people use not only material goods, such as clothing or artefacts, but also behaviours, activities, and experiences as signs that communicate meaning about their identity (Lunt and Livingstone 1992: 24).

Inspired by this theoretical shift, studies of back-packers have used Bourdieu’s (1984) term ‘cultural capital’ as a popular conceptual framework. This is particularly true of those studies seeking to highlight how international travel among affluent groups of youth has become a contemporary means of marking both class and status. Luke Desforges (1998), as one example, has suggested that back-packers engage
in the practice of ‘collecting places’, which are then used in narrations of self-identity and as markers of middle-class status. Knowledge, souvenirs, and artefacts obtained during travel become cultural capital through personal narratives and authoritative knowledge (Desforges : 189). Ian Munt (1994) has also posited that travel experiences are implicated in the formations of social class in that they have the potential to become a form of economic capital. According to Munt, as state and corporate policies shift to accommodate the knowledge-economy, travel experience increasingly becomes a pre-requisite for entering the labour market: ‘an important informal qualification … a record of achievement and experience’ (Munt 1994: 112).

The students I interviewed were fairly divided about whether or not they thought international travel would bolster their résumés or increase their prospects for finding employment. Even when such possibilities were mentioned they were not listed as a primary motivation for study overseas. For several students, the idea that time spent abroad might be an advantage when applying for a job in the future had never occurred to them until I posed the question. This was clear in Derek’s response:

I don’t know. I haven’t actually thought about like putting this on a résumé because it’s not like I’m getting a degree and it’s not like I’m studying a language here or anything. I mean if I had gone to France for a year to study like French intensively or something then that would seem like something for a résumé, but I don’t know… I hadn’t actually thought about how this would look on a résumé, but I think it is like a character building experience. It might be valuable – yeah! It might be valuable for a career because I know people here that, like, now I have contacts not just from Australia, but because I’ve met a lot of international students here, I know people from, like, all over the world.

Those students who wanted careers that were international in nature were obviously more inclined to see international experience as an advantage when applying for a job. Nathan who eventually wanted to work for an overseas NGO was certain that international experience was beneficial for anyone’s résumé:

I mean, just being somewhere else is just a sign that you don’t just have your nose in books the whole time. I mean, you have two résumés – one guy’s been somewhere, one guy hasn’t – that’s an advantage.

Nancy, who was not necessarily interested in having a career that would require international travel, was more tempered in her response:

[…] I think there’s a lot of other stuff you could do that would look better. Like, I didn’t do it as a résumé-filling thing. But I think it makes you more worldly and aware of different ways of doing things, like the way that they teach psychology here and just the way people speak and the culture.

While students were not necessarily concerned with how their study abroad or exchange experience might help them in terms of finding a career in the ‘knowledge-economy’, they were keenly aware of the fact that they could capitalise on the rationales and lists of benefits they are given from study abroad offices and use them in narratives of personal development. Nathan had some particularly candid remarks on this subject:

[…] most of the things they tell you seem fairly superficial. But I don’t think that people at the end would deny it, like they’ll probably want to say like – ‘I’ve learned to be in a globalising world’ – or something like that, but there is sort of a bit there.

Time management can be seen as a contributing factor to the formations of both social and cultural capital according to Bourdieu’s original framework. The implications of time-use as a marker of both class and social status become apparent in the light of a number of questions: With whom does one spend one’s time? Who undertakes extended periods of leisure time? What activities take up one’s time? Which activities are considered to be the most
valuable or worth-while occupation of time? And, finally, who can exert control over other peoples’ time? In a slightly different sense, time may be thought of as a form of capital in and of itself, particularly if one considers Benjamin Franklin’s well-known proclamation that ‘time is money’ (cited in Urry 1994: 133). For student mobility, time as capital ushers forth another set of questions: Who can secure the financial resources to undertake this kind of travel? When does one feel justified in taking time for oneself? Students’ narratives reveal a concern for assigning the goals of their long-term plans to specific time frames. For students, like Stephan, youth is a chance for leisure before becoming engrossed in a demanding work routine. In Eric’s case, 35 marked a cut-off point between ‘being young and having fun’ and settling into a career and family life. In this way, time as capital, in the context of study abroad programmes, also carries connotations of ‘having time’ in the way that it intersects with issues of relative wealth and popular notions surrounding the age-appropriateness of extended overseas travel.

However, locating motivations for travel within the familiar frameworks of consumption habits, or the possession of capital obscures a more complex picture of other factors that drive youths’ motivations to travel and decisions to undertake one particular mode of travel rather than another. Exchange/study abroad students and back-packers may share a class identity in terms of relative wealth and level of education, yet the differences within and between these groups of travellers in their motives for travel, destination preferences, and values attached to travel experience draw attention to the fact that as much variation can exist within class categories as between them. Considering time management as a contributing factor to cultural capital is helpful for illustrating how the meanings and values attached to time are formed relationally in the context of social networks. This does not mean, however, that the value of spending time in travel must always be weighed as a benefit for social relationships or cultural ideas about the justifiability of taking a break. In Cheryl’s case, her personal need for a break overrode criticisms from friends and family about the wastefulness of studying in Australia. The ‘cultural capital’ framework also tends to assume that the meanings and values associated with uses of time are fixed once they are established. Yet, new encounters and experiences often alter long-term plans with a corresponding shift in the value assigned to travel, education, and finding a career. Lee, for example, described how his experiences and encounters with new people in Australia had started to ‘chip away’ at what had formerly been a rigid life plan.

Thinking about time as capital, while relevant to the connections between social class and travel, tends to stress time as a possession in economic terms. This misses out on other configurations of time for the individual. For Canadian exchange/study abroad students ‘time out’ took on a spatial quality in the sense that it involved both ‘distance’ from home and social dislocation; studying abroad enabled a kind of ‘free-space’, in spite of the fact that students were subject to a number of structuring mechanisms and were engaged in routines similar to those of home. Similarly, viewing time as an object that one possesses cannot account for the ways in which orientation to the future drives motivations for travel in the present. This was observed in the way that students often articulated their experience in Australia in terms of a lifetime itinerary, or as one step towards ‘having it all’.

Conclusion

Canadian students often articulated the value of studying abroad in connection with time and, more particularly, time constraints. Where university websites emphasise the benefits of studying abroad in terms related to personal transformation and the conditions of the global
knowledge-economy, students were more often concerned with accommodating the desire to take ‘time-out’ and obtain novel life experiences without losing time towards achieving future goals. Students also seized a short period of time in Australia as an opportunity to organise and control time. The compartmentalisation of Australia as a ‘distant’ space helped to facilitate this control by providing an opportunity for students to uproot themselves from circumstances that normally consumed their time, including personal relationships and densely packed work/study routines. Hence, time management was in some instances also interlinked with the construction of space. As a space-making strategy, the motivation to participate in a study abroad programme was tied to the idea that youth was a stage in one’s life when it was acceptable to take time for oneself. This idea was coupled with an anxiety about the temporary nature of this stage and a feeling that graduating from university would also mean a substantial decrease in ‘free time’ thereafter. Canadian students’ ‘time practices’ unveil ways in which studying abroad is both an active part of a life itinerary in process, tied to future goals and social relationships and institutions, while also facilitating a break from the pressures of everyday life. The desire for a ‘productive interlude’ was also a theme that demands explanations linking social class to the ‘practices’ of time management in addition to the possession of wealth and accumulation of capital. By emphasising Canadian students’ ‘time practices’, what I have here endeavoured to show is how the meanings and values associated with time are subject to multiple and ongoing processes of negotiation, compromise, and adaptation.

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Notes

1. To clarify these categories, an exchange student takes part in a pre-established bi-lateral agreement, while study abroad students organise their semester abroad themselves due to the absence of a pre-established bi-lateral exchange agreement between their home university and the foreign university at which they wish to study. In contrast to these shorter-term options, international students complete their full degree requirements at a foreign university. Throughout this paper, I use ‘studying abroad’ or ‘studying overseas’ instead of these specific categories.

2. For other discussions in travel and tourism literature that problematise the work/leisure and production/consumption binaries that have formally been used to distinguish between travel, tourism, and migration cf. Bianchi 2000; Hall and Williams 2002; Duany 2002; Amit 2007.

3. The rites of passage model as it relates to backpackers has been subject to a number of critiques (cf. Elsrud 1998; Cohen 2004).

4. All the names in this paper have been changed in order to preserve the anonymity of students.

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