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# Consuming national themed environments abroad

## Australian working holidaymakers and symbolic national identity in ‘Aussie’ theme pubs

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**abstract** This article examines Australian working holidaymaker patronage of ‘Aussie’ theme pubs in London to explore meanings of the national themed environment. From semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork at three venues, it is argued that themed space can be interacted with in highly reflective ways while working to facilitate the reimagining of national identity. This finding challenges post-modern, critical and Weberian perspectives that argue the *ersatz* nature of themed space overwhelms actors’ ability to think critically while severing traditional connections with historical time. Attention is drawn to the polysemic dimensions of themed representations and the new ways that actors can engage with the nation in a globalizing world.

**keywords** *national identity; post-modern space; theme bars; working holiday*

### Theme pubs and global mobilities

The study of social interaction in bars, taverns and public houses (pubs) has a rich tradition in qualitative and ethnographic sociological investigation (Moore, 1897; Mass-Observation, 1943; Gusfield, 1963). These venues have been understood as liminal zones within a neo-puritan industrial order, places where sociability and consumption reinforce class, gender and national identities (Gottlieb, 1957; Clinard, 1962; Barbara et al., 1978). They have been considered sites of what Geertz (1973) refers to as ‘deep play’, providing a key social function in sustaining folkways. For example, in his study of Chicago saloons in the late 19th century, E. C. Moore (1897) argued, in the *American Journal of Sociology*, that they are a

... place where their [patrons'] philosophy of life is worked out and from which their political and social beliefs take their beginning ... this freeing of human activity is rendered possible by the stimulant which the saloon offers ... there is an exaltation of the mind, a freeing of emotional life, pleasurable ideas, rapid thought, unusual merriment ... human energy, which is after all the primal social fact, demands an avenue of escape and finds its conditions in the best way it can. (pp. 8–10)

While studies of drinking establishments in this tradition continue (Douglas, 1987; Katovich and Reese, 1987; Oldenburg, 1997), they are largely restricted to traditional or exceptional older venues, typically where 'the bulk of the patrons are "regulars" who are often on intimate speaking terms with one another and with the owner and bartenders' (Clinard, 1962: 277). What meanings can contemporary drinking establishments have for patrons in an age of global mobility where there is a lack of local interpersonal networks?

This question is examined here by considering the patronage of young Australian working holidaymakers at Aussie theme pubs in London. In doing so the article explores the blurring of the domestic utilization of national themed environments and that by tourists and travellers. As Franklin and Crang (2001) argue, the focus of tourist studies has been unduly limited by an outdated understanding of tourism being a strictly segregated escape from the everyday world. One result is that little academic attention has been given to travellers' encounters with their own culture abroad or to traveller types, such as working holidaymakers, which are neither mere strangers nor native members of the host society (West, 2005).

With the growth of the urban themed environment such travellers are likely to encounter commercial and kitsch projections of their culture within a themed motif (Gottdiener, 1997). One prominent example of such themed space is Aussie theme pubs. They are similar to other themed drinking establishments such as 'traditional' Irish and English taverns, the popular culture-inspired bars Cheers and Coyote Ugly and restaurant/bars such as Hard Rock Café and Planet Hollywood in that all represent an unprecedented blurring between fantasy and urban culture.

While fantasy environments can be dated back to the emergence of tourism in seaside resorts (Shields, 1991; Hannigan, 1998) and are evident in early 20th-century theme parks such as Coney Island, this motif was at the time strictly bound to liminal spaces and 'bore no resemblance whatsoever to models closer at hand in the city ...' (Nasaw, 1993: 230). In this sense themed establishments can be distinguished from other ethnic consumption sites. Large western cities have long contained ethnic venues such as Chinese restaurants. However, these were established from within ethnic groups with its members being the principal clientele. As ethnic restaurants from the mid-20th century became increasingly patronized by the mass they responded in altering their offerings to cater for western notions of exotic authenticity (Lu and Fine, 1995). By contrast, the national themed environment has its origins in the mainstream marketing of ethnicity. It has a more 'invented history' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) with

few, if any, organic links to ethnic groups. As Ritzer (1993) emphasizes, establishments within the rapidly growing themed environment are typically owned and controlled by multinational corporations, operating on a business model of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control.

Over the past decade Aussie theme pubs in Britain have expanded from a handful of establishments in London, to multiple bars in every major city. Walkabout Inns, owned by the publicly listed company, Regent Inns, is the largest Aussie theme pub chain. In 1994 the first Walkabout venue was opened in London's Covent Garden. In 2004 there were 50 venues, in 42 British cities, up from 20 venues in 2000 (Walkabout Inns, 2004). A similar expansion and success is evident for other Aussie theme pub brands such as Bar Oz that is located in ten cities, including the university towns of Oxford and Nottingham. While most prominent in Britain, the Australian theme pub sector has also been growing globally. For example, Café Oz, owned by the British multinational, Scottish and Newcastle, are centrally located in Paris, Lille and Hamburg.

The distinguishing features of Aussie theme pubs is a kitsch celebration of iconic and stereotypical Australian culture. For example, the use of domestic Australian slang for signage such as 'dunnies' toilet signs, a life-size imitation crocodile on a rustic corrugated iron roof overhanging the bar area, a shark head protruding from the wall, an Australian map food menu with meals such as the 'Aussie all dayer' and expressionist-inspired Aboriginal art murals. Stephen Haupt, Chief Executive of Regent Inns, notes that the theming of these venues are plenary:

You can't have a half-baked philosophy and call it a theme. We go the whole hog, and by that I mean that we don't just put a didgeridoo in the corner. To start with, the vast majority of our bar staff and managers are from Down Under . . . And with the largest range of antipodean beers on offer in the UK under one roof, we feel we've succeeded in creating a whole Australian psyche . . . We have live bands several nights a week, including the best Australian tribute bands. The rest of the time we have top quality sports coverage . . . (Crookes, 2001)

A number of independent pubs in Britain, faced with a declining and saturated marketplace (Williams, 1998) have revamped their establishments to an Australian theme. The major brands such as Walkabout and Bar Oz, however, combine national theming with the creation of a spatial and technological leisure zone which is consistent with the dominant understanding of Australia as an egalitarian country of open space, sport and a good time. As Regent Inns' Chief Executive describes,

Walkabout venues are essentially about entertainment . . . each Walkabout costs almost £2 million to build . . . We aim to intensify the whole experience as much as we can, which we do by improving technology and expanding size . . . When people go to the Walkabout, they're looking for a big night out – and that's what we aim to give them. (Crookes, 2001)

These bars are much larger than the typical British tavern. Walkabout Inns, for example, will now only consider acquiring venues that are 12,000sq or more in

size with a ground floor of 6000sq ft and a minimum ceiling height of 21ft (Crookes, 2001). This creates a spatially distinctive venue that is marketed to British drinkers, particularly those aged between 18 and 24 who constitute 7 per cent of the population but account for 22 per cent of the consumption of alcohol in bars, pubs and taverns (Williams, 1998).

However, British drinkers are not the only patrons of Aussie theme pubs. They attract a diversity of expatriates including large numbers of Australians, particularly in London where there is a density of working holidaymakers undertaking employment, typically as part of a global travel itinerary involving backpacking-style tourism (Cohen, 2004; West, 2005). For Regent Inns' Chief Executive, the presence of Australian patrons at Walkabout Inns reflects and contributes to the company's attempts to create an 'Australian feel', which they're 'proud to say is authentic', and something they take 'as a big compliment' (Crookes, 2001).

In the study of tourism such behaviour has been typically dismissed as travellers failing to engage with foreign local culture. In contrast, this article contends that it tells us much about the complexity of authenticity and how competing identities are negotiated in a world of increased transnational flows. Based on fieldwork conducted by the author between July and September 2001 at three Aussie theme pubs in London, it was found that young Australian working holidaymakers are typically critical of the projections of Australia in these places yet the venues can simultaneously prompt meaningful reflection upon their national identity. This does not occur because the actors are isolated in an 'environmental bubble' from the local culture. Rather, national identity is activated as a consequence of participation in global independent travel, characterized by extended periods abroad, the blurring of work and leisure and the search for meaning in the Other (Elsrud, 2001; Cohen, 2004).

The interactions between the nationally themed environment and these actors are fluid, involving a reinterpretation of kitsch national signifiers and a negotiation of competing national and cosmopolitan identities. It is argued that the academic literature on the themed environment fails to appreciate the polysemic dimensions of its signifiers and as a consequence neglects how nationally and ethnically themed environments can work to meaningfully create new versions of durable collective identities. The following section outlines scholarly work on the themed environment, grouping it under a number of skeins. The intention is not to provide a detailed review of writings by individual theorists, nor tease out the different ontological standings within theoretical paradigms. Rather, the 'ideal' characteristics of these literatures are focused on to illuminate key and shared assumptions in relation to the themed environment.

## Meaning, agency and the nation

In the ground-breaking work, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi and his colleagues from the Yale School of Art and Architecture (Venturi et al., 1977)

signalled a turn in the analysis of post-modern architecture by celebrating the Las Vegas strip with its neon lights, billboards and themed hotels and casinos. For Venturi and colleagues the built environment of Las Vegas, unlike modernist architecture which is obsessed with 'space, structure and program . . . a dry expressionism, empty and boring' (p. 103), communicated with ordinary people by mirroring the commercial and transportation logic of modern society. Las Vegas's eclecticism with its emphasis on playful rather than grandiose and monumental uniform design, they argue, was essentially one of aesthetic inclusion that promotes meaningful interpretation and attachment.

The authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* did not imagine that hotels and casinos such as Paris, Venetian, and Monte Carlo could be popular among citizens of these regions or that they may work to seriously shape international understanding. However, the epistemological basis of their argument is noteworthy in that it emphasizes that such environments allow greater semiotic interpretation and ornamental engagement. This distinguishes it from the major theoretical approaches on the themed environment. While each approach is loosely grouped around a particular dominant theoretical perspective, all emphasize the *ersatz* nature of themed environments that seemingly overwhelms human agency to think critically, engage or comprehend, severing individuals' traditional connections with historical time and the nation. It will be argued later in the article that such assumptions about the themed environment do not simply relate to theoretical issues but derive from a dearth of in-depth empirical analysis of the meanings these venues have for patrons (Woodward et al., 2000).

The first skein on the themed environment follows the influential post-modern work of Jean Baudrillard, and is perhaps the closest to Venturi and colleagues' celebration of Las Vegas (Zukin, 1992; Gottdiener, 1995, 1997). Making a break with Marxism's emphasis on material exchange of goods, Baudrillard (1988) argues that the world is now underpinned by the consumption of commodities as signs. This 'code' is what people use to establish and manage their identity in post-modernity: 'The circulation, purchase, sale, appropriation of differentiated goods and signs/objects today constitute our language, our code, the code by which the entire society communicates and converses' (pp. 79–80).

While Baudrillard (1983) considers this code as the basis for societal integration, it is something that involves a replacing of the real with a simulated or virtual world, 'a hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself' (p. 3). It is an environment where the sign loses its reference, the product becoming a simulacrum, where the actor is unable to distinguish between the blurring of the real and the copy. Rather than it allowing engagement through reflectivity with modernist belief systems, Baudrillard's (1988) hyperreality is one without depth, origins or reference points (cf. Lyotard, 1984).

The second skein derives from a broad adherence to a fragmented critical tradition, and also emphasizes the lack of depth in contemporary society. Critical theorists, however, more clearly locate the growth of the themed environment within a capitalist process where commodification and consumerism

have entered new realms of experience. A vast amount of scholars following theorists such as Benjamin (1969), Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), Debord (1983) and Lefebvre (1991) understand the new urban environment and its cultural products as losing their authenticity, basis and aura. For Debord, the type of thematic representation that Venturi et al. (1977) involves the 'spectacle' and occurs when the real world changes into simple images. A cultural amnesia is believed to dislodge the vital essence of tradition and the past (Soja, 1989; Jameson, 1991). As such it portrays the social world as if constituted by 'pure and unrelated presents in time' (Jameson, 1984: 72), 'dehistoricized and dishistoricizing' (Jameson, 1991: xvi), leaving 'no room for interpretation of the older kind' (Jameson, 1991: xv). In themed spaces such as shopping malls (Shields, 1994), housing estates (Soja, 1992) and theme parks (Zukin, 1992; Gottdiener, 1997), actors are thought to become lost in a world of commodity fetishism. As Foucault (1986) argues, 'the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of break with their traditional time' (p. 26).

Max Weber's (1968) and Karl Mannheim's (1936) theories of rationality provide the basis for the third skein on the themed environment, one that has recently become popular as a basis for understanding consumption establishments and the production of contemporary cultural forms (Langman, 1992; Ritzer, 1993; Bryman, 1999). The best known manifestation of this is George Ritzer's (1993) McDonaldization thesis. According to Ritzer, McDonaldization is 'the process by which the principals of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society and the rest of the world' (p. 1). Based in 'iron cage' theories of rationalization, bureaucratization and disenchantment, Ritzer's concern is with society becoming increasingly standardized by late-capitalist operational models (Ritzer, 1993). The attractiveness of theme environments from this perspective is that they offer 'a world of predictable, almost surreal orderliness' (p. 92) in which 'recreation has become yet another domain for rationalization' (p. 23). According to Ritzer the themed environment is like a tourist resort, 'one can stay in predictable settings without ever venturing out into the unpredictability of native life', they are 'campgrounds where one can have little or no contact with the unpredictabilities of nature' (p. 23).

In emphasizing the economic discontents of modernity it has been pointed out by various scholars that Ritzer and others in this tradition de-emphasize the cultural and symbolic features of themed venues and their resonance with broader symbolic structures (Featherstone, 1995; Kellner, 1999). In a developing critique of the McDonaldization thesis (Alfino et al., 1998; Smart, 1999), it is argued that it fails to account for the themed environment being interpreted in various ways.

From an empirical investigation of Aussie theme pubs it will be argued that themed environments do not overwhelm actors' critical capacities or automatically disconnect them from their nation and its past through kitsch and commercial modes. The representations in these venues are certainly hyper-real and

represent a 'branding' of nationality in the global cultural economy (Appadurai, 1990). However, these representations are also polysemic, carrying multiple meanings to actors. The interpretations are not limitless but follow particular patterns. As we will see in the next section, the meaning of Aussie theme bars in London to young Australian patrons revolves around the negotiation of established national and new cosmopolitan identities based on subscription to an independent travel ethos. These actors critically reflect upon the staged and commercialized projection of their national culture in these venues. Yet, promoted by ritualistic factors involving a heightened level of social effervescence, these environments, and the projections of Australia within them, become engaging and work to create meaningful forms of national identity. While provoking greater levels of reflexivity and irony, in these instances theme pubs in the global sphere provide contexts for 'deep play' (Geertz, 1973) and can be broadly thought to function similarly to traditional bars, pubs and taverns in providing liminal interaction experiences which prompts reflection on collective identity (cf. Moore, 1897). This national engagement though is distinctive in that it is not considered incompatible with cosmopolitan ideals of respect and engagement with foreign culture.

### **Australian working holidaymakers and Aussie theme pub patronage**

In London, a world city of international flows, there are large numbers of Australians, and travellers from most other nationalities. A significant percentage of the Australians in London are working holidaymakers who, aided by ancestry permits, dual citizenship to a European Community nation or a two-year work visa eligible to Australian citizens between 18 and 30 years of age, often mix periods of work with their 'grand tour' of Europe and the world. Approximately 20,000 Working Holidaymaker visas were awarded to Australians between 1 April 2003 and 1 April 2004. According to market research commissioned by the TNT group, publishers of the London-based independent travel and working holiday *TNT* magazines, one of the favoured social outings for this group, not surprisingly, are to pubs and bars (Stross, 2001). What is perplexing though is that considerable numbers of these Australians will visit an Aussie theme pub, some regularly, during their time in London.

How do we explain this phenomenon? There is certainly a jingoistic dimension to the patronage for some Australians who see the Aussie pub as an oasis from foreign culture:

Yeah they get some good bands in there, some good Aussie bands, good Aussie music and yeah the atmosphere is pretty good. (Male, aged 29, farmer)

The difference between this pub and every other pub in London is that you will get a bloke up here singing Aussie songs. So you come in here and it's like you are back home for like two hours, three hours and then you go back out into the cold and its fucking freezing. (Male, aged 30, network engineer)



However, the vast majority of the Australian patrons interviewed were highly critical of what they envision as the stereotypical Australian patron of Aussie theme pubs who fails to integrate within local customs and solely mixes socially with other Australians. The Australian working holidaymakers in these pubs generally align themselves with an independent travel ethos, characterized by integration and the search for authenticity within foreign culture and the avoidance of conventional tourist attractions (Elsrud, 2001; Cohen, 2004). In this post-Fordist tourist form, most popular among western youth and the new middle classes, the guest aims to distinguish themselves from organized tourism and mass culture (Urry, 1990; Munt, 1994).

Marty chose it. I have a problem with, no I don't have a problem with, but I've tried to avoid Aussie pubs until now cause I am here to meet people who are not necessarily Australians because I have the rest of my life to do that. (Female, aged 24, recruitment officer).

I would rather go to an English bar to appreciate what they have to offer, that's why we are traveling, that's why we are over here. If you want to see this shit you can go home. (Female, aged 28, waitress)

I wouldn't say I'd done my fair share because [if] I find myself in a foreign country I don't really want to experience Australian culture in its rawest form. I try and dabble in the local culture. (Male, aged 25, plumber)

It is also clear to the working holidaymakers that this themed environment is a contrived projection of Australian culture rather than an authentic representation of Australia or an Australian pub:

It is, I mean over the top, very. It is a bit tacky but that is the thing, that is basically what Poms [English] think Australia is like. Yeah crocodile on the roof! (Male, aged 25, farmer)

[It] is pretty cheesy. It is catered for the tourists. (Female, aged 27, legal secretary)

It tries to look Australian but I also think it is that very stereotypical view of Australia as the sporting look or the Aboriginal look or the Oker Aussie look. (Female, aged 26, administrator)

How then do these Australians find themselves in such an environment and why for some are they places to regularly visit? I will argue that a complex relationship is established over time between Australian patrons and the Aussie theme pub which works to engage and transform traditional understandings of nationhood. To begin comprehending how this is formed we need to consider the Australian patrons' first experience of these places. It does not occur as a consequence of randomly frequenting bars and pubs throughout London. Instead, it is one that goes to the heart of the relationship that develops between many Australian backpackers and these venues. From the interview sample, overwhelmingly the first interaction Australian working holidaymakers have with these establishments is early upon their arrival in London, if not on the first night, taken there by Australian friends:

Because one of my drunken friends that I haven't seen for a couple of years flies into London, God bless his soul, with his wife, so I thought I would take him here. (Male, aged 30, network engineer)

The first time? The night I arrived in London I went straight to a Walkabout. I went to the one in Covent Garden. I got off the plane and I met my friends at Covent Garden and went straight there. Put my pack in the cloakroom and pretty much started drinking (laughter). (Female, aged 27, legal secretary)

I must admit that I went to a [Aussie] theme bar when I first arrived in London, probably taken there by friends that were already in London. So, that was probably the first time. I have been to them a number of times in London after that and I guess it was probably to meet someone after they had first arrived, so it seems to be a trend that you know that when someone arrives in a foreign city, if there is a theme bar, you go to that bar for some reason. (Male, aged 26, project manager)

It is doubtful the first thing that these Australians want to do in London is go to an Aussie theme pub. Nor is it simply the case that their friends' patronage of these places is so frequent that it seems a natural spot to entertain their guests. It also isn't that their friends choose it to slowly integrate them into a foreign culture. Rather, those that have been away from Australia for a longer period, missing the everyday reminders of home, want to interact with their newly arrived fellow citizen in an environment that will maximize their attempts to connect with the authenticity they have brought with them from recent contact with the homeland.

In other instances, Australian expatriates are taken to the theme pub by local acquaintances, some who have previously travelled to Australia, also wishing to maximize their connection to a far-away land. Consider the following quote from someone who first visited an Aussie theme pub while living in Stockholm:

A Swedish friend of mine really likes Australia, so he invited me. When we go out he always wants to go somewhere like the Australian Boomerang [theme pub] . . . he has been in Australia, so like he has fond memories of it. So then he maybe wants to see a little bit of that again. (Male, aged 28, software engineer)

Other Australians suggest that they are attracted to these establishments for more pragmatic purposes, particularly to view sporting events involving Australia:

I basically, the only reason I come here is the sport. Because they always have whatever sport is on, they always have it on and many screens to watch it on. Whereas you go to a Pomie [English] pub and unless it is football [soccer] or England is playing, basically you have no chance. (Male, aged 25, farmer)

I knew they were going to be showing it [Britain v Australia in rugby union] at this time of the morning, live, so I don't have Sky [cable television] at home so that is pretty much why I come but I don't actually frequent Australian bars, very often at all . . . Usually State of Origin [Queensland v New South Wales in rugby league] and just sporting events is the only reason I come down to them. (Female, aged 27, legal secretary)

Aussie theme pubs are marketed as attractive places to view sport on television. They also broadcast Australian sporting events as part of their general theming strategy. In London this is particularly done to attract the niche market of antipodeans. However, even when Australian sporting matches are being broadcast elsewhere, the Aussie theme pub becomes a popular place for Australians to view these events. The result is often rituals of engagement with fellow Australians. As with other encounters in these places, this can be a trigger for a reinterpretation of these venues and their projections of Australia:

I am glad [to be here to watch Pat Rafter from Australia in the Wimbledon tennis final] because it is always nice to have other Aussies around you because on Saturday I was watching the rugby in a pub and I was the only Aussie in the pub and I felt like, oh, I couldn't cheer, I couldn't express myself . . . you go to the pub and you know it is going to be a good day at the [Aussie theme] pub because you go to the pub where you know all the Aussies are going to be and you watch it and you have a few beers and obviously if we win it is going to be great and it is such a good atmosphere. (Female, aged 26, administrator)

We avoided this place, the Walkabout, for a year and a half and then all of a sudden I wanted to come here to watch the Super 12s [southern hemisphere rugby union competition] and we come here to watch that. All of a sudden, like they have a guy here who will sing tonight, will sing tomorrow night and he will sing, like, Crowded House songs and everyone knows them, it's like you are back [in Australia]. (Male, aged 30, network engineer)

This reinterpretation and the legitimacy of patronage of these venues typically will increase the longer someone has been away from home. We could imagine that with time abroad nostalgia increases. However, it is also a period in which the expatriate has satisfied themselves, and others, that they have successfully followed the independent travel ethos of integrating into the local culture:

I got to admit, I've travelled as well and we sort of come here to watch tennis and hoped there would be a lot of Australians together to unite and support a common interest in Pat Rafter [Australian tennis player], obviously against the Yanks [American Andre Agassi]. But I got to admit that when I did travel, which is probably about six, seven years ago, I actually tried to avoid these sorts of pubs and include myself in the local pub atmosphere . . . I stuck to that theme but later on when you did catch up with an Australian in an Australian [theme] pub it was great. Otherwise a lot of people take it for granted, 'Aussie, Aussie, Aussie', and before you know it, you are in an Australian [theme] pub, Australian surroundings, but you are in England, so what's the point of that? (Male, aged 32, flight attendant)

Initially I thought this is bullshit, there's 'dunnies' and that, I didn't like it but then after a couple of years [of living in London] it's like I know what a dunnie is, it's a toilet, and I know what a Sheila is, I know where Cootabarraban is, Singleton, plus it's like you are back home for a while, it's good, that's why I brought these boys back. (Male, aged 30, network engineer)

Yet, it is a mistake to think that the only ways Australians engage with their Australian identity in the Aussie theme pub is through its national representa-

tions, products and fellow Australians. As significant are interactions with other patrons. Consider the following quotes from Australian males who strategically use their national identity in these venues while interacting with locals and other foreigners, particularly of the opposite sex:

I suppose Covent Garden Walkabout definitely would have to be [the best], you know it is an Australian [theme] pub but the thing is you know that there is a lot of Europeans that do come here. There is always that opportunity of picking someone up from a different country . . . if you are Australian there is that slight opportunity you will pick up because you are Australian and you are a novelty, you are a bit of a novelty. (Male, aged 27, plumber)

Really just to meet girls . . . I like foreign girls and meeting girls from different parts of the world . . . I don't really notice the crocodiles, I just sort of come here cause it is a travelers' kind of pub really, not Australian . . . travelers are always out to have a good time, you know they are not working tomorrow and we can come here and meet people from Brazil. (Male, aged 27, project manager).

In this way these places are not simply a surrogate for Australia. As will be explored later, for many Australian patrons they are a place where nationality is celebrated and reconceptualized. This occurs through micro social encounters which act as 'ritual games' in Goffman's (1967) sense, with individuals taking on a particular self that embodies a larger social identity. These pubs are not Habermas's (1989) late 17th-century coffee houses where the bourgeois avant-garde of the educated middle class engage in the 'art of critical-rational public debate' (p. 29). However, like them, Australian theme bars in London are an emerging institution which provides a place for interacting with others, building a broad sense of solidarity and imagining new forms of identity.

## Symbolic national identity abroad

The type of leisure-based national engagements abroad that we see in the Australian theme pub can be thought of as part of a new form 'symbolic national identity'. This concept can be contrasted with Herbert Gans's (1979, 1994) 'symbolic ethnicity' argument. In a critique of the belief that there has been a revival in ethnicity, Gans argues that instead there has been a resort to the celebration of ethnic symbols as acculturation and assimilation continue. According to Gans (1979) this has seen a growth in overt forms of symbolic ethnic identification, particularly those based around rituals of leisure and consumption:

All of the cultural patterns which are transformed into symbols are themselves guided by a common pragmatic imperative: they must be visible and clear in meaning to large numbers of third generation ethnics, and they must be easily expressed and felt, without requiring undue interference in other aspects of life. For example, Jews have abstracted rites de passage and individual holidays out of traditional religion and given them greater importance, such as . . . Chanukah, a minor holiday in the religious calendar has become a major one, partly since it lends itself to impressing Jewish identity on the children. (p. 10)

Gans (1979) notes how 'consumer goods, notably food, are another ready source for ethnic symbols, and in the last decades, the food industry has developed a large variety of easily cooked ethnic foods' (p. 10). While Gans sees that symbolic ethnicity could 'persist for generations' (p. 1), in situating it within an assimilation process he tends to understand it as an 'ethnicity of last resort' and thus unauthentic and trivial (Gans, 1994: 578). Symbolic national identity is comparatively different as the nation state remains the principal ordering unit for society. National identity though can be similarly thought to have shifted to more informal and symbolic forms, which in turn allow for new understandings of membership. In considering how this manifests itself for travellers abroad I turn to the work of Michael Billig on *Banal Nationalism* (1995).

Like Gans, Billig (1995) has highlighted the increasing role of the symbolic in group identification, arguing that in the West a large part of the reinforcement of patriotism now occurs through what he terms 'banal nationalism'. Within the nation it exists in such things as unwaved flags on flag poles, in the coin and banknotes we use daily, and through 'everyday' media and other discursive references to national boundaries, history and symbols. According to Billig, banal nationalism goes almost unnoticed yet it is internalized through daily reproduction. Banal nationalism is contrasted to 'hot nationalism' that is associated with tyranny, warfare and ultimate sacrifice, the focus of the majority of studies on nationalism. Durkheim (1915) similarly argued that while the sacred is most visible during times of crisis, solidarity in society is embedded in the routines of life and corresponds to 'the rhythm of the collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assure their regularity' (p. 23).

For Billig (1995), in the contemporary era where there is a suspicion of overt nationalism, these everyday lifestyle reminders become legitimate sites to celebrate and reinforce nationality. However, it is unclear how this manifests itself for the growing diasporas of expatriates we find within modern types of tourism. The international context results in an absence of everyday reminders of nationhood. The dearth of these though creates a situation where upon consumption they become significant symbols and rituals for activation of national identity. While the culture of certain nations is more easily accessed than others, particularly for citizens of the United States who are privileged by their international hegemony, with the growth in global flows and, as we have seen, the appropriation of nationality within the themed environment, many citizens abroad can encounter projections of their national symbols and heritage. While commercially contrived for local consumption, far from these projections universally repulsing expatriate members of the nation being themed, as we have seen with young independent travellers and Aussie theme pubs, they can be places to celebrate normally banal signifiers of national culture and in so doing rethink their national identity within the codes of contemporary global tourism.

In this scenario the hyper-real characteristics of these venues are not simply an alternative to the real, but facilitate national nostalgia among travellers who

hold cosmopolitan sentiments through an emphasis on 'everyday' symbols and rituals. The projections of Australian culture in Aussie theme pubs, such as those relating to sport, slang, music and beer, allows for its Australian patrons to manage their competing identities as citizens of a particular nation and as international independent travellers. The celebration by Australians of their national culture in Aussie theme pubs does not advance a particularly well defined political doctrine or create patriotism through a direct rejection or critique of foreign culture. Rather, in the context of the Other, it results in an enhanced appreciation of Australia's unique identity.

This process, of course, exists broadly as part of the expatriate context. When actors are overseas, nationality becomes an avenue through which to attain 'recognition' (cf. Taylor, 1994). Individuals are continually reminded of their citizenship and nationality in such ways as being asked where they are from by locals and other foreigners. As has been highlighted elsewhere, the appreciation of Australian culture by other nationalities is particularly strong in invigorating Australian identity (Spillman, 1997). It is such factors that result in many of the working holidaymakers admitting that while they were not overly patriotic while in Australia, they certainly are overseas and when banal national symbols are activated in Aussie theme pubs. This sentiment is not a mere homesickness but, as indicated in the next quote, it is of a strong emotive feeling towards national symbols that may not have been actively engaged within Australia:

I personally, I am not a sporting type person at all. I am really not into it. But over here it is more the sort of patriotism that's got me and the social aspect . . . the first time you hear 'Land Down Under' [song by the Australian band Men at Work] or Midnight Oil [Australian rock band] you just get really excited because it is probably the first time you have heard it for a while and suddenly it just stirs up all these emotions about home even though you probably never really liked the song in the first place. (Female, aged 26, administrator)

The context for this national engagement is created by an extended exposure to other national cultures, not a limited one. It occurs through subtle reminders of their nationality. While food, drink and sport have long been part of national identity, the themed environment for contemporary travellers puts these within a more cosmopolitan and playful context. As such we see a distinct form of patriotism that has high levels of reflexivity and which is considered generally compatible with the appreciation of other national cultures.

Contrary to the post-modern, critical and Weberian theoretical skeins, the power of Aussie theme pubs are not that actors lose their critical capacity within its simulated environment and that its commercial representations results in a disconnection with history and commitment. These literatures are correct in identifying the watershed in changing representations and urban forms. They are mistaken, though, that this eliminates earlier modernist identities, rather than prompting new reflections upon and engagements with them. The type of contemporary symbolic national identity outlined earlier is not a product of 'liquid

modernity' as conceived by Bauman (2000). It does not reflect an irreversible disengagement with the system resulting from increasing geographic mobility and remoteness. Rather it points to positive unintended consequences of post-modernity and the resilience of modern forms of identity in a global world. Australian patrons experienced the Aussie theme pub in a way that connected them with their nation while providing a place where it could be reimagined.

## Conclusion

It has been argued that counter to theoretical assumptions on the themed environment, it is possible for actors to interpret and engage with this environment in ways in which they attain enchanted meanings while remaining sceptical and critical of its kitsch and commercial projections. Despite Aussie theme pubs containing a seemingly trivial and simplistic representation of nationality, for many Australian working holidaymakers they polysemically provide symbolic contexts to ritually celebrate Australia. In the international context where many actors are voluntarily estranged from their homeland, banal symbols of the nation can become manifest signifiers of identity. However, with contemporary notions of global travel this will also involve actors negotiating and interlinking national and cosmopolitan sentiments. Australian working holidaymakers, for example, had to resolve the seeming conflict between their patronage of Aussie theme pubs and their identity as independent travellers. The finding that nationalist sentiments can emerge from a hyper-real themed environment contributes to sociological debates over the durability of national identity and the transformation, rather than disintegration, of modernist belief systems in an era of globalization.

While this article has highlighted a meaningful dimension of Aussie theme pubs, further research is needed on how this differs among various Australian expatriates and in a variety of locations. A greater sample size, including those who have not encountered these places, could provide a more detailed understanding of expatriate interaction and engagement with national theme pubs. Detailed ethnographic investigation is also required into the interaction rituals among patrons of these venues, as well as the attraction and understanding of them by local customers. Finally, while Australian theme pubs have undertaken extraordinary international growth in recent years, this is small in comparison to the international spread of Irish and British theme pubs. While the article has linked the Australian patronage of Aussie theme pubs to broad debates about themed environments and nationality, a similar study on other venues abroad would provide rich comparative data.

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