

# Tales from Nowhere: Burma and the Lonely Planet Phenomenon

Darcy Mullen

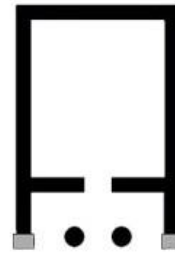
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## Tales from Nowhere: Burma and the Lonely Planet Phenomenon

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### Introduction

Pioneered by Tony and Maureen Wheeler, Lonely Planet has provided much sought-after travel tips and non-fiction literature for those with an appetite for exotic travel since the early 1970s. As the leader in the guidebook industry, Lonely Planet has had the reputation of catering to so-called shoestring travellers who aim to get off the beaten path. The imagined Lonely Planet guidebook reader is one who is dedicated to 'responsible tourism' that leads to 'a way of travelling that will challenge your perceptions; shake you out of your comfort zone; enthrall you and enrich your soul. Not only will you make a contribution to other people's lives, you might just change your own'.<sup>1</sup> The Lonely Planet ethos is that travel is beneficial, and the *experience* is the goal and cause of that benefit. A rhetorically unique situation emanating from Lonely Planet is its role in the Myanmar tourism debate.<sup>2</sup> A project of this scope suggests some ways of reading Lonely Planet's role in the creation and manipulation of space of tourism in Myanmar. Here, I argue for a careful examination of how Lonely Planet articulates Myanmar as specifically *nowhere* and, therefore, suitable for the publication's own appropriation.<sup>3</sup>

In his text *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell identifies tourism as the commodification of 'pure experience, which leaves no material trace', and that these tourist spaces and experiences can be read through a relationship between markers and sign/sight replacement.<sup>4</sup> I extend MacCannell's argument to suggest that the function of *forbiddenness* and *nowhere* is central to Lonely Planet's idea of the tourist experience in Myanmar. Moreover, the rhetoric of Lonely Planet has determined particularities of the spatial orderings of Myanmar as a result of tourist structures catering to the idea of the forbidden. Through a reading of Lonely Planet's rhetoric in its Myanmar texts, we can

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted from their website in 2007. The current site reads differently. Tony and Maureen Wheeler, 'Responsible Travel', Lonely Planet. <[http://www.lonelyplanet.com/responsibletravel/travel\\_tips.cfm](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/responsibletravel/travel_tips.cfm)> [accessed 25 March 2016].

<sup>2</sup> The act of using the name "Burma" or "Myanmar" is complex. For the purposes here, I use the name "Myanmar" rather than "Burma", or "Myanmar/Burma". "Burma" refers to only one specific ethnic group (the Burmese) while Myanmar is a more ethnically inclusive term. However, as the name was an imposition from the current governmental regime, many resist its use as a method of political opposition. I choose the word "Myanmar" while knowing that this is fraught with problems as it is the version with the most international recognition.

<sup>3</sup> Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 21, 117.

see the construction of a forbidden place on both literal and metaphorical levels. Consecutively, the nine editions of their travel guides (published from 1979 to the 2005 edition) contain the progressive creation and narration of the tourist space of Lonely Planet's Myanmar—in the formative years of its narration of elsewhere as *nowhere*. Their strategy of articulating *forbiddenness* is central to creating the tourist experience in nowhere.

## Nowhere as the Fourth World

Reading Lonely Planet's texts demands an understanding of a collective meta-author rather than differentiating between Tony Wheeler, Joe Cummings or Michael Clark, and others. Lonely Planet is engaged in public pedagogy, with a particular set of politics, which it disclaims for all of its writers once published under the "Lonely Planet" name. They pride themselves on being interactive with their readership: incorporating travel tips and suggestions from travellers who share their suggestions (as they state in all their guides as well as on their website). Furthermore, the stance they take is one emphasising collectivity.

Underlying these projects is a self-admitted ethic of responsible tourism, which Debbie Lisle describes in her 2006 article, 'Humanitarian Travels: Ethical Communication in Lonely Planet Guidebooks', as the following:

Lonely Planet's inclusive brand of humanitarian travel is based on two key principles: (a) there is a *right* way to travel (that is, responsibly, independently); and (b) this kind of travel is *good* for everyone on the planet. As Wheeler [himself] argues: "Today, more than ever, we're utterly convinced of the incredible importance of travel. It's only through traveling, through meeting people that we begin to understand that we're all sharing this world. We are all coming along for the ride, despite the barriers which governments, religions and economic and political beliefs often seem to build up between us [...]"<sup>5</sup>

The humanitarian cosmopolitanism inherent in their project has come under scrutiny due to the controversy surrounding tourism in Myanmar.

Lonely Planet is the leader in the guidebook industry, appealing to travellers on a shoestring budget who aim to travel *off the beaten path*.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the publication of travel guides, Lonely Planet also publishes curious collections of travel writing and photography collections. In the opening pages to one such Lonely Planet collection of travel writing, *Tales from Nowhere*, Megan Morris's following quote functions in tandem

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<sup>5</sup> Debbie Lisle, 'Humanitarian Travels: Ethical Communication in Lonely Planet Guidebooks', *Review of International Studies*, 34(1) (2008), 155-172, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 156.

with Don George's introduction ('Introduction—Nowhere everywhere') as a manifesto for the authors of *Tales From Nowhere*, as *Fourth Worlders*. Morris's epigraph states:

There are people everywhere who form a fourth world, or a diaspora of their own. [...] They may be patriots, but they are never chauvinists. They share with each other, across all the nations, common values of humor and understanding. When you are among them you know you will not be mocked or resented, because they will not care about your race, your faith, your sex or your nationality, and they suffer fools gladly, at least sympathetically. They laugh easily. They are easily grateful. They are never mean. [...] They are exiles in their own communities, because they are always in a minority, but they form a mighty nation, if they only knew it. It is a nation of nowhere.<sup>7</sup>

Morris' formulation of the cosmopolitan Fourth Worlders provides the Lonely Planet travellers with a manifesto that determines the vignettes of "nowhere" in the collection of stories that follows. As with the case of the Lonely Planet ideology of 'responsible tourism', Morris' passage calls for a universalised identification of the multicultural traveller, who is not subject to prejudicial ideologies otherwise dividing humanity.

Here it is worth evoking what Manuel Castells terms the "fourth world" in his works *The Rise of the Network Society (Vol 1 and 2)*. Castells describes the fourth world as those areas of the Third World that are under-represented or unseen in the global world economy. These places are where so-called black market or informal economies occur.<sup>8</sup> In Lonely Planet's context, the use of the term "Fourth World" has displaced the historical, material consequences of what we can understand as the relational space of the actual fourth world areas (such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Chiapas, the hutongs of Beijing, Cambodia, Thailand, Botswana or other "nowheres" in this collection). The rewriting of what it means to be a Fourth World-er allows these Lonely Planet travellers to claim the histories of oppression, persecution and conflict inherent in the largely colonial histories of these places of nowhere. The fantasy of forming a nation in "Nowhere" thus extends even into colonial fantasies.

The opening movements of *Tales from Nowhere* gesture towards a reclamation of the tourist as an identity group. As Dean MacCannell describes in his analysis in *The Tourist*, the tourist is, largely, a hated, ugly creature that no one wants to be, and travellers will often go to great lengths to disguise themselves as non-tourists. Beyond that, Morris states that, in fact, 'they form a mighty nation'.<sup>9</sup> The opening paragraphs in *Tales from Nowhere* are the efforts to articulate the position of the Fourth World-er and defend their

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<sup>7</sup> Megan Morris, 'Epigraph', in *Tales From Nowhere* (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet Publishing, 2006), p. 05.

<sup>8</sup> See Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. I: The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), and his *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. II: The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Morris, p. 5.

position as tourists. This manifesto is not ironic. For them, it is impossible that travel could in fact be oppressive.<sup>10</sup>

If, however, the reason to travel is (as Lisle quotes Wheeler as stating) ‘meeting people’, in order to learn ‘that we’re all sharing this world’, then travel teaches us we are all the same and there are only variations in the spaces and geographies that we occupy.<sup>11</sup> If place is what can teach the traveller, what can they possibly learn from “nowhere”, or a supposed (yet impossible) place of lack? In the introduction that follows Morris’s quote, Don George defines “nowhere” for the reader as ‘a setting, a situation and a state of mind. It’s not on any map, but you know it when you are there’; furthermore, a sense of ‘disorientation’ always accompanies nowhere.<sup>12</sup> “Nowhere”, for Lonely Planet, is a geography that we should understand through what David Harvey terms ‘relational’ rather than ‘absolute’ understandings of space.<sup>13</sup> The internal relations between the nowhere spaces and the traveller define them as such, rather than the traveller’s situation in their geometric or geographic boundaries. These nowheres *are* particular places, and they are certainly not ‘states of mind’ for those living there. Going ‘nowhere’ creates a ‘state of mind’ or a learning moment for the writer, which has less to do with the nowhere-ness of the place but rather the tendency of tourists to use ‘Third World countries as a backdrop for [...]personal voyages of self-discovery’.<sup>14</sup>

## Guidebooks to Nowhere

Beginning with Lonely Planet’s *Burma—A Travel Survival Kit* (1979), we can start to see how “nowhere” works rhetorically.<sup>15</sup> The first edition of these guides sets the tone for the narrative of Burma as a place defined by what is off-limits: a narrative that Lonely Planet maintains and manipulates for the next three decades. Lonely Planet paints Burma as a place full of the exotic and unknown, which, although nothing new in travel writing (or other “humanitarian”, colonial writings dealing with the exotic Other), perpetuates a discourse which creates a tourism-based economy. This, in turn, eventually led to the

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<sup>10</sup> This type of rhetorical analysis would not be possible without the earlier foundational work by Edward Said in his seminal 1978 text, *Orientalism*, Mary Louise Pratt’s 1992 text *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, and David Spurr’s 1993 text, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. These works opened the door for questions of elsewhere, nowhere, and the places not yet imagined in-between.

<sup>11</sup> Lisle, p. 164.

<sup>12</sup> Morris, pp. 7, 11.

<sup>13</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London, New York, NY: Verso, 2006), p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (New York, NY: Harper Business, 2004), p. 252.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Wheeler, *Burma—A Travel Survival Kit, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.* (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet Publications, 1979).

displacement of one and a half million Burmese.<sup>16</sup> The introduction to the first edition opens the story of Burma by stating:

To the west, Burma is still a virtual unknown—a slightly exotic eastern country that has been on some sort of total seclusion plus mad socialism binge since WWII and has also been torn by continual internal strife involving a whole dictionary of anti-government rebels, guerrillas, insurgents and assorted malcontents. True, true, true and yet somehow all false.<sup>17</sup>

In the above passage we see that there is the promise of a destination 'virtually unknown', anthropomorphised by its strange hunger (mind the 'binge') for 'total seclusion plus mad socialism'. This place is desirable, first, because of its off-the-beaten-path status, which is to say that its seclusion is the first half of the coupling that describes it. Furthermore, there is a stippling of civil political unrest, violence and danger in the country. The combination of isolation and danger creates the sense of excitement for the tourist. The text would encourage the tourist's affirmation of their expectations, yet the conclusion of '[t]rue, true, true, and yet somehow all false' anticipates a displacement of these expectations for something truer and more authentic from this lacunaic country.

The strategies at work in the Lonely Planet guides to Myanmar are further complicated; however, it becomes clear that the presentation of forbiddenness itself is intrinsic to Lonely Planet's presentation of markers that ultimately create the narrative space of Myanmar. The moments in Lonely Planet's guides that this analysis takes up as constructing Myanmar for the western tourist as a place of forbiddenness include markers of indecipherable language, "Off-Limit" Cities, literal and legal restrictions on travel, terrorists, black market schemes, and the absent-yet-omnipresent factors of crime and poverty.

The first edition describes the Burmese language as something that the (normatively Anglophonic) tourist will meet at an impasse. The reader learns that the Burmese will speak English to them in the cities but only Burmese in the country towns or villages.<sup>18</sup> Since the reader is illiterate in Burmese, the tourist is outside of the flow of communication. Furthermore, Lonely Planet lets the tourist/reader off the hook—or more specifically, directs the traveller to the acceptance of a schism within *communication*. The description of Burmese is 'rather like a lot of mating bubbles and circles, very distinctive and quite indecipherable! You're hardly going to have time in Burma to pick up the alphabet'.<sup>19</sup> Communication problems are not something the traveller should

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<sup>16</sup> Figures on the magnitude of deaths and enslavement of residents however, are inconclusive and contradictory. See Davis, p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> Wheeler, *Burma*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Joe Cummings and Tony Wheeler, *Myanmar (Burma): A Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet, 1996), p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Wheeler, *Burma*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. 35.

anticipate (the guide states that English is widely spoken in cities).<sup>20</sup> The text does, however, infantilise the ‘social material’ of language (the word ‘bubbles’ is not part of a serious lexicon), and dissuades learning.<sup>21</sup> Once replaced by Lonely Planet’s specific marker, the ‘indecipherable’ miscegenation of cartoon forms, the ‘zaniness’ of the Burmese language creates for the traveller a space of communication that is a forbidden space.<sup>22</sup>

The more spirited anecdotes and descriptions in this set of guides refer to forbidden areas and activities, as in the above example of the ‘social material’ of language.<sup>23</sup> Playing on these expectations, the climate of the forbidden easily becomes social and geographic reality for the tourist reading Lonely Planet’s Myanmar. For example, in the first edition, there is a section titled ‘Off-Limits’ that is, arguably, explicitly the nucleus from which the subsequent Lonely Planet guides (in Myanmar) engages in sight-replacement that creates a forbidden geography in Myanmar.<sup>24</sup> From the sixties to 1990, Burma was only available to travellers through a seven-day visa and within that time, and particular places are literally forbidden to tourists.<sup>25</sup> These “Off-Limit” places include Bassein, Moulmein, Sandoway, Yyohaung, Thaton, the ‘Hill Tribes’ (which actually describes the people, and not a place) and, as listed, (a place called) ‘Other’ (in ‘Other’, there is where ‘a high percentage of Burma’s precious stones are mined’).<sup>26</sup>

The social reality of a repressive government is the emphasis in the ‘Off-Limits’ section, which begins:

Actually the Burmese are delightfully vague about just what is “off-limits” and what is not [...]. Some places are probably only slightly off-limits [...]. Of course the places you’re banned from are to some extent in your own interests—it’s where the government’s hold is most tenuous and the rebel activities the strongest where you’re emphatically banned [...] Information on some of the places you cannot visit follows.<sup>27</sup>

Then the guide provides information about what to visit once you get there, and warns that one is likely to encounter smugglers, the opium trade, terrorists, and illegal gem trading.<sup>28</sup> A personal narrative from Canadian traveller Vic Esbensen follows the ‘Off-Limits’ section in the second edition.<sup>29</sup> Esbensen travelled through ‘Off-Limits’ areas in

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> MacCannell, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Tony Wheeler, *Burma—A Travel Survival Kit*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet Publications, 1985), paratext.

<sup>23</sup> MacCannell, p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Wheeler, *Burma*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. 138.

<sup>25</sup> Joe Cummings and Tony Wheeler, *Myanmar (Burma): A Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet, 1993), p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> Wheeler, *Burma*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., pp. 138-141.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>29</sup> Tony Wheeler, *Burma—A Travel Survival Kit*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet Publications, 1982), p.164.

1963. In his travels, he comes across a tiger ('Yes, it was a tiger.'), is snagged by government soldiers (in the racist declaration 'they all looked the same to us!'), compares his surroundings to the 'wild west' ('I have seen such things in movies'), and ends up in Pwinbyu where he has to 'pay for [his] sins'.<sup>30</sup> We even learn that when all tourism stopped from 1966 to 1969, Esbensen went there again, anyway.<sup>31</sup> The lively description of Esbensen's adventure is unarguably the most excitement-laden section of the text and, in this description of social material, Lonely Planet combines the travel experience with notions of the forbidden.

Pages prior to the supposed mugging, Lonely Planet makes strong moves to represent the residents of Myanmar as friendly and nothing-but-amiable to the Western tourist. The first edition states that 'it's always dangerous to try and pin national characteristics on a people', yet does so anyway.

[T]hroughout Burma you seem to meet people of quite amazing friendliness. It could be this is just a result of the small flow of foreign visitors to Burma but I think it is much more likely that the Burmese are simply a very friendly and outgoing people.<sup>32</sup>

The text goes to great lengths to ensure the tourist's safety amongst the kind and peaceful Burmese. A commentary such as this also prevents a linkage between the intrinsically friendly residents and the danger that these texts rely on. The statement on national characteristics is accompanied by a comment on the general economic conditions in a particular way that is present in the 2005 guide.

The Burmese economy may be in pretty rotten shape but poverty is something that hardly exists in Burma—they may not be able to export so much rice anymore but nobody goes hungry. Beggars (monks apart of course) are virtually non-existent. Rip-offs are also rare events—people are honest and straight forwards: they're one of the best memories brought back from [...] Burma.<sup>33</sup>

This disclaimer has both a disavowal and warning of crime in the third edition of the guides. The following caveat explains crime in Burma:

[a]dded to this, one has the overwhelming impression that the Burmese would simply be too polite and well mannered to think of inconveniencing a foreigner... the possibility of being mugged, robbed, held up or otherwise enjoying any of those other unpleasant, everyday western events is similarly remote although there has been one isolated case of a woman getting robbed in Pagan [...] despite which, I recommend you keep a close eye on your valuables, particularly on overnight train trips. The severe shortage of consumer goods can make your possessions just a little bit too tempting at times.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 166-167.

<sup>31</sup> Wheeler, *Burma*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> Wheeler, *Burma*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Steven Martin, Mic Looby, Michael Clark and Joe Cummings, *Myanmar (Burma)*, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet Publications, 2005), pp. 15-16.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 42.



Here it is important to make a distinction between danger and the forbidden in the markers within these guides. Being ‘held up’ is described as a mere ‘inconvenience’ and a ‘western’, ‘everyday’, unpleasantness—but not as something dangerous.<sup>35</sup> The texts go to illogical lengths such as these in order to remove the idea of danger from Burma, while maintaining the place as ‘Off-Limits’.

Consider the next example of the description of terrorists in the fourth edition in 1988.<sup>36</sup> In this edition, there is a rich section on insurgency (dating back to 1948, the guide claims, despite this being the first mention of terrorism). It concludes with the following: ‘It’s all very complicated but one thing seems certain: as long as Rangoon ignores demands for self-determination, equality and democracy from groups representing 32% of the population, the insurgency will most likely continue’.<sup>37</sup> This section expands and gets its own grayscale box in the next edition, in 1993.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, there is a double-talk going on here (friendly/but maybe criminal) that ultimately obfuscates understanding. If Lonely Planet gives the tourist permission to go someplace forbidden and the tourist already harbours suspicion that they are engaging in something dangerous (by virtue of their travel), then they are given justification for their guilt and absolved of it in the same move by going to a forbidden place.

From a survey of these texts, we can see Lonely Planet perpetuating a rhetoric that pushes tourists into forbidden places, and the spaces understood as forbidden literally change.<sup>39</sup> An example from the third edition is how social arrangements responding to ideas of the forbidden are in Myanmar’s policies on currency exchange and what Lonely Planet terms the whisky and cigarette deals.<sup>40</sup> The third guide (the 1985 edition) opens with a peculiar “warning” that remains in the openings of the 1988 and 1993 editions. The disclaimed gestures towards a scheme laid out in the first and second guides (the 1979 and 1982 guides) in which Lonely Planet advocates buying whiskey and cigarettes at duty free prices and selling them illegally in Myanmar to get cash (kyats) rather than declare currency. The opening reads:

*And a Special Warning:* One of the problems of writing about a country as zany as Burma is fear that you’ll kill the golden goose. I don’t think the whisky and cigarettes deals are going to disappear just because I write about them because they’re comparatively minor and long established... There are some little wrinkles about Burmese travel that I have felt it best to be quietly discrete about—don’t think I didn’t notice them, even try them, you’ll just have to do a little research of your own folks!<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Wheeler, *Burma—A Travel Survival Kit*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet Publications, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Cummings and Wheeler, *Myanmar (Burma): 5<sup>th</sup> ed.*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>39</sup> Heath and Potter, p. 271.

<sup>40</sup> Wheeler, *Burma*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

In 1996, the golden goose dies when Myanmar's government responded to the tourist's forbidden behaviour by making it economically advantageous to return to the beaten path of trade, so to speak. According to the 1996 and 2002 guides, this scheme is no longer necessary (but stupid) because all government sanctioned establishments now accept US dollars at a better rate than you can get selling your goods yourself. By the ninth edition in 2005, this disclaimer disappears altogether.<sup>42</sup> The significance of this disclaimer, however, is the idea that the traveller is engaging in a less risky version of illegality. For the Lonely Planet traveller, here the forbidden is a game, even described in terms of zaniness, childish folly (read: the golden goose as a figure from "Jack and the Beanstalk", for example) left in the hands of future travellers to un-wrinkle and play out.

### Boycotting Nowhere

According to Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*, from 1989 to 1994, the SPDC displaced at least one and a half-million people from Kway-le-gyi, Kyauk-saung-aing, Lan-thabye-kone, Kyet-su-aing, Kyanfokkone, the Sinkkaing Township, Rangoon and Mandalay<sup>43</sup> to peripheral cities (called the "New Fields") in order to prepare for 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996'.<sup>44</sup> The 1996 guide briefly mentions 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996' stating that the tourism infrastructure is too 'deficient' to accommodate tourists, and that it is too difficult to get outside of the 'Yangon-Mandalay-Bagan-Inle Lake quadrangle'. In other words, it is too difficult to go 'off-limits', and therefore Lonely Planet predicts 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996' will be disappointing.<sup>45</sup> The "New Fields" are reportedly 'located 20 to 30 km outside Rangoon and other cities', but their exact locations are questionable in media reports. These include "'New Pagan", to the south and inland from Thiripyitsaya village' and 'near Kyappayay on a sugarcane plantation'.<sup>46</sup>

In 1996, the regime displaced one and a half-million people to the cities' peripheries in order to prepare for an expected tourism boom during 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996'.<sup>47</sup> According to Davis, the once-urban neighborhoods became a golf course expected to

<sup>42</sup> See Robert Reid and Michael Grosberg, *Myanmar (Burma)*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet Publications, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Place-names are a difficulty in any analysis of Myanmar, due to the frequency with which the government has changed them under the guise of breaking the chains of neo-colonialism (although many unreliable sources have speculated that name changes have been governmental attempts to obfuscate global critiques).

<sup>44</sup> Davis, p. 107. Also see: 'Farmlands confiscated to build new Burmese capital Kyappayay', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 19<sup>th</sup> January, 2006, in *Displacement and causes of displacement in Mandalay Division: Documents*, p. 5. <<http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs4/Mandalay-docs.pdf>> [accessed 25 March 2016].

<sup>45</sup> Cummings and Wheeler, *Myanmar (Burma)*: 6<sup>th</sup> ed., p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> 'Farmlands confiscated...'; 'Pagan: The New Earthquake', *Burma Review*, 1990 [month unknown], in *Displacement and causes*, p. 23; 'Burma army forcibly relocates thousands from Pagan', *Reuters*, 28<sup>th</sup> June, 1990, in *Displacement and causes*, p. 22. <<http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs4/Mandalay-docs.pdf>> [accessed 25 March 2016].

<sup>47</sup> Davis, p. 107.

attract Japanese businessmen and Western tourists.<sup>48</sup> The SPDC junta engaged in the creation of a particular of nowhere-ness, relying on the ‘constant spatial dislocation’ which ‘has become the foundation of the regime’s [...] “quasi-utopian” attempt’.<sup>49</sup> According to Davis:

Rangoon has become a nightmare combination of a “Buddhist tourist wonderland,” a giant barracks, and a graveyard: it is “a landscape glorifying the control and authoritarian vision of its leaders.”<sup>50</sup>

Beyond mere tourist structures, many residents were displaced to make room for a new airport as well as ‘the expanding new administrative capital Kyappyay’.<sup>51</sup>

Human rights violations (such as those described above) have led—understandably so—to various boycotts of tourism to Myanmar. Suu Kyi first asked that tourists and members of the tourism industry boycott Myanmar in 1995. The British civil rights group called Burma Campaign UK organises their protest around three points:

(i) that human rights abuses are linked directly to the Junta’s efforts to develop a national tourism industry (e.g. forced labour was used to build hotels and airports); (ii) that tourism helps to sustain one of the most brutal regimes in the world, and there is no way to travel in Burma without providing funds to the dictatorship; and (iii) Burma’s democratically elected government (the NLD) have asked explicitly for a tourism boycott.<sup>52</sup>

Lonely Planet has not participated in that boycott. Other members of the guidebook industry responded to the tourism boycott by discontinuing their tourist guides for Myanmar. Rather, as Burma Campaign UK had posted on their website in 2004:

Lonely Planet publishes a guide to Myanmar and actively promotes tourism to Burma, despite knowing the many ways that tourism lends support to the brutal dictatorship in Burma. In contrast, the publisher Rough Guides has adopted an ethical stance with regard to Burma: “There are occasional instances where any benefits (from tourism) are overshadowed by the nature of the social and political climate. Apartheid South Africa was an example. Burma, with its brutal dictatorship, state control of the economy and forced labour used to build its tourist infrastructure, is another. As long as the military regime remains in power and Aung San Suu Kyi—leader of the democratically elected National League for Democracy—requests that tourists do not visit, Rough Guides will not publish a guide to the country.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Davis, pp. 107-115.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Lisle, p. 167.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Burma Campaign’ (2004). <<https://www.gapyear.com/boards/viewthread/6196>> [accessed 25 March 2016].

The first mention in any of the texts about ethical implications in traveling to Myanmar comes in the fifth guide.<sup>54</sup>

When Myanmar started being read, internationally, as an 'Off-Limits' area, Lonely Planet responded by removing rhetoric of literal forbiddenness from their texts, while maintaining the descriptions of Myanmar as a forbidden area. From the sixth edition (of 1996) onward, the 'Off-Limits' section has completely disappeared, possibly because the whole country is distinguished as an off limits area by the myriad boycotts. From 1996 onward, (again or otherwise) there is no mention of displaced residents into poverty and slums. Instead, the guides maintain that there is no poverty or crime to see in Burma, and this is consistent with their rhetoric since their first guide.

Moreover, in the eighth edition, there is an extensive 'Should You Go Section' (which is smaller comparatively to the 'Should You Go Section' in the ninth edition).<sup>55</sup> From the eighth guide onward, Lonely Planet requests that travellers to Myanmar talk politics with the locals about the political situation in Myanmar, quoting a NLD supporter who supposedly states: 'Don't come in with your camera and take only pictures. We don't need that kind of tourist. Talk to those who want to talk. Let them know the conditions of your life'.<sup>56</sup> In the 'Myanmar: The Decision to Travel to Burma Should Not Be Taken Lightly' section, Lonely Planet's website gently states that 'going to Myanmar is more complicated than just buying a ticket. Lonely Planet encourages all visitors to read up a little before making a decision many claim is a bad one.'<sup>57</sup> This could be difficult for the Lonely Planet reader, given that the guide book misquotes its primary sources (both Suu Kyi and Burmese Campaign UK) to skew the facts in favour of personal travel to Burma in its 'Should You Go Section', ultimately leaving the Lonely Planet reader with the impression that they now have all the facts and that Suu Kyi's opinion is merely one woman's judgment among many.<sup>58</sup> On the next page, however, the advice for the traveller reverses. The traveller learns that talking to local Burmese with the bounds of the country will lead to their arrest, imprisonment and other compromising situations.<sup>59</sup>

Lisle quotes Suu Kyi's response to Lonely Planet's stance on the work of the tourist amongst Burmese locals, stating:

That's so patronizing! Burmese people know their own problems better than anyone else. They know what they want—they want democracy—and many people have died for it.

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<sup>54</sup> Cummings and Wheeler, *Myanmar (Burma): 5<sup>th</sup> ed.*, p. 38.

<sup>55</sup> Martin, Looby, et. al., *Myanmar (Burma), 8<sup>th</sup> Edition*.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>57</sup> 'Myanmar: The Decision to Travel to Burma Should Not Be Taken Lightly', Lonely Planet. <<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/destinations/asia/myanmar>> [accessed 25 March, 2016].

<sup>58</sup> Martin, Looby, et. al., *Myanmar (Burma), 8<sup>th</sup> Edition.*, p. 17.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25.

To suggest that there's anything new that tourists can teach the people of Burma about their own situation is not simply patronizing—it's also racist.<sup>60</sup>

At the end of the 'Should You Go' section, Lonely Planet concludes, 'your trip to Myanmar doesn't end when you return home', meaning that the directives of the ethic of responsible tourism demands further humanitarian action.

Lonely Planet affirms on their website that their choice to publish guides to Myanmar is a necessary one that would be akin to censorship. They state:

Make no mistake: our decision to publish is not a show of support for the current regime and we fully support the restoration of democracy in Burma. We do not, however, believe you create new freedoms by *stifling information or banning books*.<sup>61</sup>

Here, Lonely Planet attempts to separate themselves and their travellers from Rough Guide travellers. By assuming they are doing the good humanitarian travel as articulated by Lonely Planet's guides, tourists can distinguish themselves from the larger problematic tourist presence in Myanmar.

## Conclusion

The role of Lonely Planet's rhetoric within the relations of production and space demands attention due to what is at stake for those for whom nowhere is more than just a 'state of mind'.<sup>62</sup> Myanmar is still heavy with questions: how are changes in government related to economic dependence from tourism? What will happen to the structures of tourism (will golf courses built by slave labour be visited in reverence as sites of torture)? And how will Lonely Planet retell the historical conflicts in Myanmar that they have so far managed to de-problematise? Through 1996 (the sixth edition of the guides to Burma, as it was called at the time), the introduction to the Lonely Planet guides presented Myanmar as a nowhere place. This particular narrative opening informed Lonely Planet's travellers for nearly twenty years, stating: 'To most of the west, Myanmar—until 1989 known as Burma—is still a geographic question mark—a slightly bizarre eastern country that has been on some sort of total seclusion plus mad socialism binge since WWII'.<sup>63</sup>

The rhetoric of "nowhereness" Lonely Planet uses to frame Burma, and the reasons to go there, is also in the non-fiction, travel writing published by Lonely Planet, and worth further consideration. In two examples, Rolf Potts's story 'The Living Museum of

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<sup>60</sup> Lisle, p. 167.

<sup>61</sup> 'Myanmar: The Decision to Travel to Burma Should Not Be Taken Lightly', Lonely Planet. My emphasis.

<sup>62</sup> Ron George, 'Introduction', in *Tales From Nowhere*, ed. by Dan George (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet Publishing, 2006), pp. 7-12, p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> Cummings and Wheeler, *Myanmar (Burma): 6<sup>th</sup> ed.*, p. 9.

Everywhere and Nowhere', from the previously mentioned collection *Tales From Nowhere*, and Tony Wheeler's *Bad Lands* (2007), we see the rhetoric of "nowhere" applied as a way to tell the story of Myanmar.<sup>64</sup>

In his short story, Pott recounts his experience in Myanmar with nostalgic longing: 'I'd hoped to find an experience as far from the tourist trail as that rickety speed bike could take me, and I felt I'd succeeded admirably'.<sup>65</sup> Nowhere in his essay, his author's bio at the back of the collection, or in what he calls his virtual home—his website<sup>66</sup>—does Potts mention the social, political or economic conditions of Myanmar.<sup>67</sup> Potts instead shows the virtues of Myanmar as a tourist destination, the excitement of which depends on several factors: Myanmar's *nowhereness*, the impoverished economy hosting two-cent mangoes, and the excitement of running from police informants—the last two of which are the result of the SPDC. Potts concludes his story by comparing his day in Kansas with his weeks in Myanmar; Kansas is redeemed for him and enriched by his exotic journey to Myanmar and through operating in Lonely Planet's Fourth World-er status.

Tony Wheeler's *Bad Lands*, on the other hand, is described (in its paratext) that Wheeler has written a 'witty first-hand account of [his] travels through some of the most repressive and dangerous regimes in the world', including Burma. In the *Badlands* Wheeler considers

"what makes a country truly evil?" and "how bad is really bad?"—all the while engaging with a colourful cast of locals and hapless tour guides, ruminating on history and debunking popular myths... This fascinating account of life in these closed-off countries will appeal to anyone with an interest in the state of the world today.<sup>68</sup>

One thing these places share is their 'closed-off' nature. The thread of evil recalls the state of mind that defines nowhere. Wheeler states that the bad lands have 'nothing to do with geography or topography' and 'these were countries that had gone wrong and that people, not nature, had made the wrong turns'.<sup>69</sup> Conflicts in the so-called Bad Lands regarding natural resources, land-rights, and geopolitics are glossed over. It is worth noting however, that Myanmar is here not simply "nowhere", but it is an *evil* space.

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<sup>64</sup> Rolf Potts, 'Living Museum of Everywhere and Nowhere', in *Tales From Nowhere*, ed. by Dan George (Victoria, AU: Lonely Planet Publishing, 2006), pp. 216-222; and 'Tony Wheeler's *Bad Lands: A Tourist on the Axis of Evil* and Q & A with Wheeler about His New Book', Lonely Planet.

<<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/press/2007/04/17/tony-wheeler-bad-lands-a-tourist-on-the-axis-of-evil-and-qa-with-tony-wheeler-about-his-new-book/>> [accessed 25 March 2016].

<sup>65</sup> Potts, 'Living Museum of Everywhere and Nowhere', p. 216.

<sup>66</sup> See <<http://rolfpotts.com>> [accessed 25 March 2016].

<sup>67</sup> Potts, p. 283.

<sup>68</sup> See 'Tony Wheeler's *Bad Lands: A Tourist on the Axis of Evil* and Q & A With Wheeler About His New Book'.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*



Through this short analysis of Lonely Planet's textual construction of a rhetoric of forbiddenness and Myanmar as a nowhere space, I hope to suggest some of the foundations upon which Lonely Planet has shaped the literal geography of Myanmar, as well as national understandings of Myanmar as what David Harvey might call a relational space. The questions raised by the particular methodology in this study seem to point toward an evaluation of the aims in tourism, particularly when the point of travel is the search for a metonymic construction of particular affective threads, like that of the forbidden. A rhetoric of "nowhere" will not be the final-word in reading traps of eroticising travel, and Myanmar is not the only case study available for this kind of reading. Examining the rhetoric of the forbidden is, perhaps, a reading heuristic for narratives of places in which the idea of the forbidden notates a place as nowhere-space.

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