

# Humanitarian travels: ethical communication in *Lonely Planet* guidebooks

DEBBIE LISLE\*

**Abstract.** Aside from the more mundane purpose of telling us where to eat, sleep and sightsee in foreign lands, guidebooks communicate an ethical vision that sees travel as the key to reducing cultural differences and inequalities. This article argues that *Lonely Planet* guidebooks in particular encourage a form of ‘responsible independent travel’ that both reflects and produces a powerful discourse of humanitarianism. By examining the controversy over *Lonely Planet*’s publication of guidebooks to Burma, this article uncovers the problematic colonial logic embedded in that ethical vision.

## The world is yours

For thirty years, the most important advice printed in all *Lonely Planet* (LP) guidebooks was ‘Just Go!’<sup>1</sup> Don’t be constrained by predetermined itineraries, don’t book anything in advance, don’t go on package holidays – just go somewhere else on your own terms and have an adventure. Certainly, this message captures the wanderlust that entranced backpackers in the 1970s and 1980s, a majority of whom relied on Tony and Maureen Wheeler’s first LP ‘shoestring’ guidebook to Asia. It also captures the rise of independent travel in the 1990s which saw LP transform from a small niche market to the largest guidebook company in the world. While the spirit of adventure symbolised by ‘Just Go!’ continues to infuse the LP brand, its corporate motto has now been replaced by ‘Attitude and Authority’. As Maureen Wheeler explains, ‘When we were selling five thousand Japanese guidebooks a year, who cared what we said? At fifty thousand, you have a different responsibility.’<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as LP got bigger, their notion of ‘responsible independent travel’ became more pronounced. Now, stamped into every LP guidebook is the following statement:

The main aim is still to make it possible for adventurous travellers to get out there – to explore and better understand the world. At Lonely Planet we believe travellers can make a positive contribution to the countries they visit – if they respect their host communities and spend their money wisely.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tad Friend, ‘The Parachute Artist: Have Tony Wheeler’s Guidebooks Travelled Too Far?’ *The New Yorker*, 18 April 2005, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Plunkett and Brigitte Ellemor, ‘Foreword: About Lonely Planet Guidebooks’, *Lonely Planet Sri Lanka*, 9th edn. (Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications, 2003), p. 8.

From the very beginning, LP has offered itself as an ethical alternative to traditional guidebook publishers like *Frommers* and *Michelin*. Through its charismatic ‘counter-cultural’ business leaders (Tony and Maureen Wheeler), its autonomous production process (no advertising), and its focus on off-the-beaten-track Third World destinations, LP has cultivated a community of adventurers who define themselves predominantly against mainstream tourism.<sup>4</sup> As the ‘scruffy but valiant enemy of the cruise ship and the droning tour guide’, LP offers an alternative ethical vision of travel that seeks to overcome – rather than entrench – the global inequalities bequeathed by colonialism and capitalism. While more mainstream guidebooks might participate in a tourism industry that maintains such global inequalities, LP seeks to produce a community of responsible independent travellers who see the cross-cultural communication of travel as the key to alleviating these global discrepancies.

This article examines the logics of power that are being articulated within LP’s ethical vision. Despite its claim to offer an ‘alternative’ form of responsible independent travel, LP cannot help but resuscitate the very global inequalities it seeks to overcome – inequalities that bear more than a passing resemblance to their colonial antecedents. A similar conjunction of travel, colonialism and global politics was addressed by Cynthia Enloe in her important book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*.<sup>5</sup> Enloe argued that while many Western women used travel to escape the patriarchal confines of their domestic lives, they often reproduced familiar colonial power relations whilst abroad by subordinating local men and women. As Enloe rightly suggests, the reproduction of colonial power through travel is disseminated most effectively through visual culture – in the films of Carmen Miranda, in tourist postcards, in fashion statements, art, magazines, billboards, and television programmes. For me, the intricate conjunction of travel, colonialism and global politics makes itself felt textually as well, especially in popular travel stories and guidebooks. As I have argued elsewhere, contemporary travelogues – the stories written by Bill Bryson, Paul Theroux and Michael Palin – cannot rid themselves of a powerful colonial heritage, even in their most virtuous efforts to articulate a cosmopolitan message.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, it is not that difficult to see how such a colonial echo operates through the more functional pages of the guidebook – indeed, that is part of what this article tries to illustrate. But I want to develop that argument further by showing how LP guidebooks in particular seek to alleviate – and even eradicate – such a colonial echo by drawing from, and reproducing, a powerful discourse of humanitarianism. This discourse is, of course, familiar to students and scholars of global politics: we see its rhetoric in calls for military intervention; in official justifications for military occupation; in the implementation of development policies; in global campaigns to fight AIDS, poverty, famine and debt; and in the charity appeals for a variety of natural disasters. The fundamental message of humanitarianism is that we are all part of the same global society, and therefore we have an

<sup>4</sup> For a good analysis of the development of independent travel, see K. F. Hyde and R. Lawson, ‘The Nature of Independent Travel’, *Journal of Travel Research*, 42 (2003), pp. 13–23.

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); see especially ‘On the Beach: Sexism and Tourism’, pp. 19–41.

<sup>6</sup> Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

ethical obligation to help one another should the need arise. While LP travellers may not have the official clout of soldiers, aid workers and diplomats, they contribute to humanitarian efforts through more direct and everyday means by spending hard currency where it is most needed and by increasing cross-cultural understanding between individuals. In effect, humanitarianism – whether enacted on a macro scale through military intervention or on a micro scale through the cross-cultural travels of LP readers – seems to provide all the answers. It makes the world a better place by helping less fortunate others, and it makes those doing the helping feel better in the process. How could one be *against* such a noble desire? How could one *not* be a humanitarian?

This article questions the sacred discourse of humanitarianism by showing how – despite claims to the contrary – it resuscitates a powerful colonial logic. I want to explain this manoeuvre through LP's decision to publish guidebooks to Burma against the stated wishes of the Burmese pro-democracy movement and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>7</sup> Tony Wheeler remains adamant that LP's form of responsible independent travel offers 'the type of communication that in the long term can change lives and unseat undemocratic governments' – including the government in Burma.<sup>8</sup> From this position, LP's advocacy of travel to Burma is a humanitarian gesture: Western travellers can help foster democracy and challenge the unelected military junta. But Burmese pro-democracy advocates – including Suu Kyi herself – are adamant that any form of travel, no matter how independent, sanctions the government and therefore participates in the oppression of the Burmese people. From this position, LP's advocacy of travel to Burma is simply another neo-colonial exercise of power; indeed, LP values the needs and desires of an already privileged community (LP's responsible independent travellers) over the needs and desires of an oppressed community (Burmese citizens). By examining the controversy over the Burma guidebooks in detail, this article seeks to reveal the colonial architecture underscoring the discourse of humanitarianism.

### The problem with virtue

What interests me about the discourse of humanitarianism are the boundaries, exclusions, power relations, hierarchies, and differences that are produced under the guise of inclusion, multiculturalism, equality, justice and charity. As David Kennedy explains, there is a *Dark Side of Virtue* that goes hand in hand with any effort to act or intervene for humanitarian reasons.<sup>9</sup> While it is important to track the 'dark side' of humanitarianism in foreign policy decisions, diplomatic manoeuvres, and military interventions, we often forget that this discourse is secured most effectively in the

<sup>7</sup> I use the term Burma rather than Myanmar in part to highlight the history of colonialism in Southeast Asia, but also to follow the lead of Burma Campaign UK. Although the use of either name indicates a political position, there is no consensus over whether Burma or Myanmar is the preferred term. Indeed, LP uses *Myanmar (Burma)* on its guidebooks.

<sup>8</sup> Friend, 'The Parachute Artist', p. 82; see also Tony Wheeler, 'Tourists Should Not be Ashamed to Go Back Soon', *The Independent*, 31 December, 2004, p. 33; and 'Tony Wheeler's Guide to the Risks of Travel', *The Independent*, 22 September 2001, 'Features', pp. 2–3.

<sup>9</sup> David Kennedy, *The Dark Side of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

cross-cultural communication embedded in things like films, photographs, novels, and indeed, guidebooks. And this is where Armand Mattelart's work is most instructive. His arguments about 'cultural diversity' and 'multiculturalism' – popular buzzwords in the 1990s – are equally applicable to the contemporary discourse of humanitarianism. Mattelart argued that such all-inclusive terms do nothing to engender equality; rather, they actually reify the unequal power relations of global communication that were established through colonial rule.<sup>10</sup> This argument has been developed further by critical scholars such as Slavoj Žižek who seek to uncover the racist logic of our multicultural dreams at the end of the twentieth century. As he states:

multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a 'racism with a distance' – it 'respects' Other's identity, conceiving of the Other as a self-enclosed 'authentic' community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position.<sup>11</sup>

The critiques made by Mattelart and Žižek are even more urgent now because as multiculturalism came under increased critical scrutiny in the 1990s – especially from postcolonial scholars – humanitarianism emerged to carry forth and reposition a number of its key principles.<sup>12</sup> The point here is that both multiculturalism and humanitarianism reproduce the same logic: there is always a privileged subject who extends a helping hand to an already subordinate and victimised Other, and in the process entrenches the very inequalities s/he is trying to alleviate. Numerous forms of action are mobilised to try and explain, and more importantly solve, the Other's difficulties: extended media coverage, global charity appeals, fact-finding missions, official visits, emergency financial and medical aid, and the mass migration of aid workers. And each action serves to intensify the divide between the abject victims who experience pain and suffering, and the noble benefactors who alleviate it. The problem, of course, is that the pain and suffering of Others is always so urgent and life-threatening that it becomes politically suspect to question the motives and agendas of those providing assistance.

However, the noble foundations of humanitarianism – especially the entrenched subject positions of 'helper' and 'helped' – have begun to be questioned by scholars in Critical Development Studies. This growing body of work critiques orthodox theories of development and challenges the way they all – from earlier strategies of Modernisation to more recent forms of self-help – produce a fundamental inequality between the privileged subjects who decide upon the supposedly universal standards of development to be met, and the subordinate subjects who are forced to meet those standards.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, Marianne Gronemeyer's deconstruction of the notion

<sup>10</sup> Questions of diversity and multiculturalism emerge in much of Mattelart's work, but *Mapping World Communication: War, Progress, Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) was an important contribution to this debate in the early 1990s. These issues were rearticulated in *Networking the World, 1794–2000* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and continue in his more recent untranslated work.

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 225 (September–October 1997), p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> The literature on this debate is vast, but a good starting place is Cynthia Willett (ed.), *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate* (London: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> For good introductions to this literature, see Arturo Escobar's *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Uma Kothari and Martin Minogue (eds.), *Development Theory and Practice: Critical Perspectives*

of ‘helping’ brilliantly exposes how gestures of altruism throughout the centuries have always been framed by those in power. In this sense, the colonial logic underscoring the discourse of humanitarianism has simply been masked by a new rhetoric. As she argues: ‘the metamorphosis from a colonialism that ‘takes’ to one that supposedly ‘gives’ has been completed under the protection of this euphonious word, help’.<sup>14</sup> Whether the rhetoric of help was used to save poor souls for entrance into heaven, or to protect people from the evils of Communism during the Cold War, it has always had the same effect: it destroys the capacity of those being helped to determine their own way of life and their own direction in the world.<sup>15</sup> This eradication of autonomy is accomplished by what Gronemeyer calls ‘elegant power’ – that which renders the receivers of aid and development *needy* without them realising the abject condition of that position. As she argues, such a manoeuvre ‘is a means of keeping the bit in the mouths of subordinates without letting them feel the power that is guiding them. In short, elegant power does not force, it does not resort either to the cudgel or to chains; it helps.’<sup>16</sup> For me, Gronemeyer’s notion of elegant power is expressed most perniciously in the discourse of humanitarianism: under the guise of helping others it actually reinstates a ‘quasi-feudal’ power differential between those who give, and those who receive.

Philosopher Alain Badiou makes a similar critique of our ‘self-satisfied’ efforts to help more unfortunate Others, but focuses specifically on the ethical foundations of altruism.<sup>17</sup> His critical account of ethics not only works against the Kantian universalism embedded in familiar arguments about multiculturalism, it also challenges the moralising post-colonial arguments that privilege concepts of difference and marginality.<sup>18</sup> It is not that post-colonial arguments are wrong per se; indeed, Badiou praises ‘decades of courageous critiques of colonialism and imperialism.’<sup>19</sup> Rather, it is that such critical positions have been picked up and assimilated into the much larger universalising project of humanitarianism. Badiou reveals how such a project requires the oppositional subject positions of ‘benefactor’ and ‘victim’: a good person (a benefactor) is an active, conscience-driven subject who identifies suffering and does what s/he can to help the passive subject (the victim). In the process, however, the victim is turned into ‘the haggard animal exposed on television screens’ that ultimately satisfies the benefactor’s twinned desires of horror and fascination.<sup>20</sup> Badiou rejects this construction of the Other, and in doing so he is forced to reject the ‘ideological framework’ of ethics itself which is founded on a problematic opposition between benefactor and victim.<sup>21</sup> What is important about Badiou’s work is the way he contextualises and historicises the benefactor/victim

(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Uma Kothari (ed.), *A Radical History of Development Studies: Individuals, Institutions and Ideologies* (London: Zed Books, 2005); and Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge and Power* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Marianne Gronemeyer, ‘Helping’, in Sachs, *The Development Dictionary*, p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Peter Hallward, ‘Translator’s Introduction’, in Badiou, *Ethics*, p. xxx.

<sup>19</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 12–13. For more on how our humanitarian responses are triggered by a fascination with, and desire to consume, scenes of catastrophe, violence and victimisation, see Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 16.

logic in the experience of colonialism. Indeed, he argues that ‘the essential “objective” basis of ethics rests on a vulgar sociology, directly inherited from the astonishment of the colonial encounter with savages’.<sup>22</sup> It is precisely these feelings of astonishment and fascination that LP guidebooks encourage – but they bury such a ‘vulgar sociology’ in the noble sentiments of humanitarianism. What Gronemeyer and Badiou offer are complimentary ways to critique the supposedly unassailable goals of humanitarianism – ways to illustrate how the noble efforts of benefactors (in this case LP travellers) require a simultaneous construction of victimised Others.

### Form, function and mediation

The virtue of guidebooks is that they borrow from several competing epistemological domains: historical knowledge, geographical data, ethnographic notes, architectural detail, philosophical reflection, and commercial business reports.<sup>23</sup> In essence, the guidebook takes the place of the human travel guide: it is ‘a cheap, portable, and convenient substitute for a living guide, who may be more or less competent, reliable, avaricious or lazy’.<sup>24</sup> The similarities between human and textual guides are explored in Bhattacharya’s study of *LP India* where she applies a traditional taxonomy of human guides to the guidebook.<sup>25</sup> Firstly, she argues that guidebooks provide ‘instrumental leadership’ by acting like pathfinders: they help the traveller navigate through foreign landscapes. This function is achieved not only with detailed physical maps and map descriptions, but also through common sub-divisions such as ‘Facts about the Country’, ‘Basics’, ‘General Remarks’, ‘Practical Notes’, ‘Contexts’, ‘Facts for the Visitor’, ‘Getting There and Away’, and ‘Getting Around’ and so on. Since the publication of the *Baedeker* and *Murray* guidebooks in the early nineteenth-century, this pathfinding function has been enabled by the arrangement of facts into organised itineraries and routes.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, Bhattacharya argues that guidebooks provide ‘interactional mediation’ by connecting the tourist to the local population and its amenities – exactly like the ‘middleman’ function of the human tour guide. And finally, she argues that guidebooks provide ‘communicative mediation’ by connecting tourists to famous objects of sightseeing. Whereas the primary pathfinder function of the guidebook is factual, the last two functions are evaluative – and this is where the guidebook operates most explicitly as a ‘culture broker’, judging local amenities for their quality, price, service and location, and judging tourist attractions according to their ‘must see’ status.<sup>27</sup> While explicit evaluative mechanisms like ‘star’ systems were established as early as 1844, many are now geared explicitly at value (for

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in an Age of Dissolution* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Foulke, ‘The Guidebook Industry’ in Michael Kowalewski (ed.), *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel* (Athens, GA and London: University of Georgia Press, 1992), p. 95.

<sup>25</sup> Deborah Battacharyya, ‘Mediating India: An Analysis of a Guidebook’, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 24:2 (1997), pp. 373–4; Battacharyya draws on Eric Cohen’s seminal essay ‘The Tourist Guide: The Origins, Structure and Dynamics of a Role’, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 12 (1985), pp. 5–29.

<sup>26</sup> Edward Mendelsohn, ‘Baedeker’s Universe’, *Yale Review of Books*, 74 (1985), p. 389.

<sup>27</sup> Battacharyya, ‘Mediating India’, p. 374.

example, what is the best hotel for the least amount of money) and efficiency (for example, if you only have two days you must see these three sites). As Foulke points out, ‘the traveller, unlike his Victorian predecessor, has no vast colonnades of time to fill during several years of the grand tour, so the guidebook had to help him use what time he had efficiently.’<sup>28</sup>

Battacharyya’s reworking of the human guide taxonomy is useful in that it positions guidebooks as agents of mediation between writers, readers, and the people and places they visit. But further elaboration is needed on the text-subject relationship and the forms of communication that operate between them. Firstly, unlike travelogues or novels which are identified explicitly by their authors, guidebooks construct a collective authorial voice that is primarily identified by the publisher. In other words, it is the brand name of the series – *Baedeker*, *Frommers*, *Rough Guide*, *Michelin*, *LP* – and *not* the individual writer that constructs the authorial voice of the guidebook. Given that these texts are mostly written by a number of people, all differences of opinion must be subsumed by the overarching necessity to speak in the voice of a single ‘brand’ – in this case, a publishing company. Certainly the authorial voice varies with each publisher – while the tone of the *Baedeker* was always ‘reassuringly steadfast and proverbial’, the LP guidebook ‘speaks to you in an intimate, conversational tone’ and becomes ‘a bosom companion.’<sup>29</sup> What marks LP guidebooks out from the rest is that such a ‘conversational tone’ dispenses with any pretence of neutrality; indeed, the Wheelers have always encouraged LP authors to be explicit about their judgements when evaluating foreign destinations:

I would expect someone writing for us about Spain to delve into bullfights, and either to say it’s a cruel and primitive spectacle or to say that it’s just as great as Hemingway said – and, either way, here are the hours the bullring is open, and do bring sunscreen.<sup>30</sup>

However, Wheeler’s encouragement of opinionated authors who speak their minds has its limits: all authorial judgements are framed in advance by the ethical vision of the company. An LP author would not, for example, advocate sex tourism and leave it up to the reader as to whether or not they will participate.<sup>31</sup> To put it another way, ‘here are the hours the bullring is open, and do bring sunscreen’ is an opinion that is encouraged and accepted, but ‘here are the hours the brothel is open, and do bring a condom’ is not.

Secondly, LP’s judgemental authorial voice works to construct independent decision-making readers. Such a convention draws from modern notions of liberal individualism and autonomy that were central to guidebooks in the nineteenth-century. As Karl Baedeker explained in 1858, the ‘principle object’ of the guidebook was:

<sup>28</sup> Foulke, ‘The Guidebook Industry’, p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> Mendleson, ‘Baedeker’s Universe’, p. 390; Friend, ‘The Parachute Artist’, p. 80.

<sup>30</sup> Friend, ‘The Parachute Artist’, p. 88. The pretence of neutrality is certainly the driving strategy of the competing Dorling Kindersley ‘Eyewitness’ guidebooks; Personal interview with DK ‘Eyewitness’ editor Douglas Amrine, 8 November 2001, Dorling Kindersley Offices, London.

<sup>31</sup> Wheeler’s advocacy of judgemental authors was reproduced faithfully in my interview with the LP public relations officer in London: ‘LP is very keen that our authors should have opinions about things, that they should speak their mind. We are sending them out there to put across their opinion, to tell it as they see it, and not to gloss over things’; Personal interview with Tom Hall, 7 November 2001, Lonely Planet Offices, London. Hall was also clear that LP writers would not advocate sex tourism which is ‘very removed from LP. It’s a totally different thing. It’s just not independent travel, which is what we are all about.’ Personal Interview, Tom Hall.

... to keep the traveller at as great a distance as possible from the unpleasant, and often wholly invisible, tutelage of hired servants and guides (and in part from the aid of coachmen and hotelkeepers), to assist him in standing on his *own* feet, to render him *independent*, and to place him in a position from which he may receive his own impressions with clear eyes and a lively heart.<sup>32</sup>

The guidebook's construction of independence keeps travellers very much at arm's length from their destination as they weigh up their impressions of a foreign place, compare their judgements with the author's, and situate their final evaluations within the guidebook's ethical vision. This is a delicate balancing act: although independent travellers may be informed by their LP guidebooks, in the end they always have the capacity to make up their *own* minds about a destination. This reflects Rudy Koshler's argument that the tightly woven itineraries of guidebooks create significant space for individual interpretation, practice and choice. No matter how much the guidebook mediates between the traveller and the destination, it never completely governs the 'irreducible' nature of personal experience.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, and most significantly, LP's judgemental authors and its independent decision-making readers join together in an ethical community. Indeed, LP is very clear about identifying and branding the attributes of this community, especially when trying to forge business links with other companies:

However they travel and wherever they go, Lonely Planet travellers are aware of the world around them. They are curious, receptive and independent, thinking for themselves and travelling responsibly. They follow both classic routes and roads less travelled, seeking their own unique and authentic travel experience. They are global citizens and, more than anything else, they just love to travel.<sup>34</sup>

LP authors and travellers are *good*: they make up their own minds and have their own opinions, they travel independently and responsibly, they make authentic and beneficial cross-cultural contacts, and they contribute financially to their host communities. Unsurprisingly, such a construction has its inevitable Other: all those who don't belong to the LP community are *bad tourists* who travel in packs, obey their guidebooks to the letter, go on package tours and never get to see the 'real' destination behind the tourist façade. Indeed, LP is unapologetic about promoting this fundamental distinction between its clearly defined ethical community and the rest of the tourist population. At their 'Us or Them' Travel Summit in Melbourne in 1994, LP suggested that travellers 'like us' (travellers who use LP guidebooks and adhere to the LP ethos) pursue a more sustainable form of tourism than tourists 'like them'.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Mendleson, 'Baedeker's Universe', pp. 387–8.

<sup>33</sup> Rudy Koshler, *German Travel Cultures* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000), p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> This description of the typical LP traveller is displayed on their specialist webpages directed at other businesses – it is primarily used to demonstrate the kind of market other companies can access by building partnerships with LP; available at: <[www.lonelyplanet.biz/about102.htm](http://www.lonelyplanet.biz/about102.htm)>, accessed 9 November 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Brian King, 'Us or Them? Lonely Planet Travel Summit', *Tourism Management*, 16:3 (1995), pp. 245–6; for further elaboration on how the tourist/traveller distinction was enshrined in the early LP guidebooks, see Gillian Kenny, "'Our Travellers" out there on the Road: *Lonely Planet* and its Readers, 1973–1981', *Journal of Australian Studies*, January 2002, pp. 111–19.



## The new humanitarianism

LP's advocacy of humanitarian travel seems rather uncontentious when framed within a clearly defined ethical community of authors and readers. But the colonial underpinnings of such a project become much more pronounced when we analyse the relationship between LP's ethical community and the 'victimized Others' it both constructs and requires. Indeed, this is precisely where postcolonial critiques of guidebooks are most persuasive: they effectively call attention to how Others – the excommunicated masses that Mattelart champions – are produced and framed through a Western lens. Battacharyya, for example, reveals how 'the dominant Western discourse about the Other' secures unequal power relations between LP guidebook users, the exotic subjects they encounter, and the foreign objects they gaze upon. By politicising the process of mediation between the guidebook and its users, she is able to show how *LP India's* authoritative narrative voice makes patronising judgements about Indian customs, gives a wholly benign view of British colonial rule, and frames India primarily as a 'difficult and dangerous place' that can only be endured by using the LP 'survival kit'.<sup>36</sup> Battacharyya's critique suggests that guidebooks are Orientalist texts: they secure ethnocentric perspectives, produce other spaces and subjects for Western consumption, and caricature entire histories and cultures according to a predetermined set of values that reinforce European superiority.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as Mendleson illustrates, Orientalist assumptions dominated nineteenth-century guidebooks such as the *Baedeker*:

Baedeker was scarcely alone in assuming not merely that the observer was separate from the observed, but that the observer was therefore superior. And Baedeker was also scarcely alone in assuming that the observing northern European was consequently the most superior form of humanity . . . the Baedeker handbooks never seriously doubted that in lower latitudes morals grew slack and manners coarse. Honour and dignity could be found in every climate, but less frequently and less predictably in Southern ones.<sup>38</sup>

This ideological function not only secured European superiority *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world, it also served to reinforce national stereotypes and hierarchies within Europe itself. Roland Barthes famously argued that the national stereotypes perpetuated by the 'country profile' arrangement of guidebooks covers over the wider structural and class inequalities of society. In this sense, guidebooks operate as 'agents of blindness' because their caricatures and stereotypes fail to depict the complex conditions of ordinary people. Speaking specifically about France's famous *Blue Guides*, Barthes explains:

We find again here this disease of thinking in essences, which is at the bottom of every bourgeois mythology of man (which is why we come across it so often). The ethnic reality of Spain is thus reduced to a vast classical ballet, a nice neat commedia dell'arte, whose improbable typology serves to mask the real spectacle of conditions, classes and professions.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Battacharyya, 'Mediating India', pp. 375–8.

<sup>37</sup> Although Edward Said did not examine guidebooks specifically in *Orientalism* (although he did examine travel writing, ethnography, science writing, and so on) these texts certainly belong to Europe's wider project of producing and managing the Orient in the post-Enlightenment period; *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Mendleson, 'Baedeker's Universe', p. 399.

<sup>39</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Blue Guide', in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 75.

For Barthes, guidebooks are ‘moral ejaculations’ that serve a prevailing bourgeois mythology and reinforce inequalities between nations, cultures and communities.

While such postcolonial and structural critiques constitute a useful starting place, they cannot explain LPs current formulation of humanitarian travel. The problem is that such critiques often overdetermine the space of cultural encounter by suggesting that interactions between travellers and locals are wholly governed by unequal relations of colonial or structural power such as self/other, guest/host, West/East. But while asymmetrical power relations are undoubtedly secured in the space of encounter, this is also the place in which significant transgressions occur – transgressions that break down established logics of power and clear the way for new power relations to be articulated and disseminated.<sup>40</sup> Speaking about the transformation of guidebooks in the late nineteenth-century, Behdad suggests that we can only begin to detect ‘a new and more dominant stage in the evolution of Orientalism’ when the space of colonial encounter is refigured outside such overdetermined colonial and structural logics.<sup>41</sup> He does not suggest that Orientalism was over by the late nineteenth-century; rather, he argues that it was broken up and reconstituted through new discursive mechanisms that ultimately made it more effective. I want to argue that something similar is going on with contemporary LP guidebooks: they are facilitating the dissolution of an outdated colonial logic and the articulation of a new discourse of humanitarianism. My concern, of course, is that such an outdated colonial logic is not dissolved at all in this process, but rather, is smuggled into this new discourse of humanitarianism in covert and subtle ways.

LP’s inclusive brand of humanitarian travel is based on two key principles: (1) there is a *right* way to travel (that is, responsibly, independently); and (2) this kind of travel is *good* for everyone on the planet. As Wheeler argues:

Today, more than ever, we’re utterly convinced of the incredible importance of travel. It’s only through travelling, 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>42</sup>

LP guidebooks are, of course, not the first to promote the humanitarian benefits of travel. Indeed, in 1937, Baedeker’s great grandson argued that the ‘proper’ political function of guidebooks was to foster a healthy curiosity for other cultures in order to reduce the ‘difference and enmity’ that plagued Europe after World War I.<sup>43</sup> This

<sup>40</sup> This refiguration of the space of encounter is derived from Mary Louise Pratt’s account of the ‘contact zone’ in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992). Pratt’s own formulation derives, in part, from Homi Bhabha’s notion of hybridity and third space, see *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) and ‘Cultures in Between’ in Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> Behdad, *Belated Travellers*, p. 52.

<sup>42</sup> This discussion of ‘responsible independent travel’ can be found on LP’s website; available at: [www.lonelyplanet.com/responsibletravel/overview.cfm](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/responsibletravel/overview.cfm), accessed 9 October 2006, as well as further statements about travel bringing the world together (for example, ‘Lonely Planet is passionate about bringing people together, about understanding our world, and about people sharing experiences that enrich everyone’s life’ [www.lonelyplanet.com/about/#LonelyPlanetToday](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/about/#LonelyPlanetToday)), accessed 13 November, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Frederich Baedeker, ‘On the Task and Form of the Travel Guide’, unpublished manuscript, no place of origin, February 1937, quoted extensively in Alex W. Henrichson, *Baedeker-Katalog, Part I: History of the Firm*, trans. Michael Wild (Holzminden: Ursula Hinrichson Verlag, 1989), p. 34.

alternative genealogy about the benefits of travel contradicts postcolonial and structural critiques: guidebooks do not reify inequality, they *overcome* it by pointing out our similarities. We are all part of a wider category of global humanity, and travelling and learning about other cultures reinforces this sense of global belonging. The key here is that by constructing an inclusive category of global humanity, Others are placed in the *same* ethical orbit as LP readers and writers – we are all part of the *same* world. This allows LP authors and readers to denounce the irresponsible and ethically dubious travel of their colonial forbearers and strengthen the intercultural connections between all equally valued global citizens.

My point is that LP's brand of responsible independent travel carries with it a number of problematic assumptions. Firstly, despite overtures of equality, LP does not, in fact, represent Others on equal footing with its authors and readers. Certainly they are nominally included in LP's category of global humanity, as the website explains, 'people are the same wherever they're from; we all have the same needs and desires, aspirations and affections.'<sup>44</sup> But what about the Others who are placed in abject positions in order to service the cross-cultural encounters instigated by LP travellers, and gratefully receive the hard currency doled out in the name of rectifying global inequality through travel? The point here is that within LP's ethical community, Others are never able to speak for themselves or set the discursive terms for such cross-cultural encounters. Secondly, LP's characterisation of authors as opinionated and readers as independent decision-makers keeps both subjects protected from the discursive negotiations that shape everyone who engages in cross-cultural encounters. In this sense, I think Kosher is wrong to argue that guidebooks express an 'irreducible' individual autonomy. Within such a liberal-humanist account of the subject, it is impossible to see that LP actually takes away the independent decision-making capacity of the traveller and sells it back to them as 'choice'. As Caruna, Crane and Fritchett argue, the entire notion of independence in guidebooks is flawed: 'the effect of this construction is to position the independent traveller as independent whilst simultaneously engendering dependence on the guidebook to sustain that independence'.<sup>45</sup> LP users *think* they are making active independent choices about their destinations, but in fact those decisions have already been framed in advance by LP's ethical vision. What is often forgotten in this process is how the cultivation of 'independent choice' has become an extremely successful marketing strategy. Ironically, Wheeler's insistence that he is 'not trying to take away from the pleasure of finding new things yourself so don't take my recommendations as gospel' has been ignored by millions of LP travellers who follow their LP bibles to the letter and move in 'big flocks'.<sup>46</sup> LP has become a victim of its own success: in getting away from the beaten track, it has beaten its own supposedly 'alternative' track that is now

<sup>44</sup> LP tips on Responsible Travel. Available at: <[www.lonelyplanet.com/responsibletravel/travel\\_tips.cfm#culture](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/responsibletravel/travel_tips.cfm#culture)>, accessed 10 November 2006.

<sup>45</sup> R. Caruna, A. Crane and J.A. Fritchett, 'Paradoxes of Consumer Independence: a Critical Discourse Analysis of the Independent Traveller', Paper presented at the 4th DeHaan Tourism Management Conference, 13 December, 2005, Nottingham Business School, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Wheeler made this claim in his 1979 *Southeast Asia Guide*, quoted in Kenney, 'Our Travellers', pp. 115–16. I disagree with Kenney's argument that early LP readers were somehow doing something 'independent' and 'authentic' that was different from tourism. More persuasive in this respect are Cohen's claims about the institutionalised structure of 'alternative travel' and the way guidebooks like LP actually evacuate spontaneity rather than facilitate it: see E. Cohen, 'Nomads from Affluence: Notes on the Phenomenon of Drifter Tourism', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 14:1–2 (1973), pp. 89–103; see also Friend, 'The Parachute Artist', p. 82.

faithfully followed by millions of LP travellers who turn out-of-the-way places into ‘something that’s loved to death’.<sup>47</sup> As one commentator explained:

It’s something about the way they take you over – you become a slave to the guidebook. . . . they’re tedious to read, and the pictures are crap, and everyone else has got one too, so instead of being the independent traveller you thought you were, you end up being just another sheep in the *Lonely Planet* flock – with Wheeler as your shepherd.<sup>48</sup>

So why does LP remain the number one guidebook publisher in the world, selling 3 million books a year and getting 1 million hits a day on its website?<sup>49</sup> Because it has transformed its ethical vision into one of the most valuable and recognisable brand names on the market. The company’s relaunch in 2004 was, in part, an effort to bounce back after the twinned crises of SARS and 9/11, but it unwittingly exposed the new business model underscoring LP’s ‘caring’ and ‘right-on’ ethical identity. After decades of refusing to take advertisements in their guidebooks, the Wheelers sold 30 per cent of the company to an Australian advertising magnate and embarked upon a ‘business to business’ campaign to create profitable partnerships with other like-minded companies.<sup>50</sup> LP now operates a hotel booking service, and several commercial travel services (for example, selling travel clothing) through their successful website. The relaunch was also an effort to further segment their target market and cater to ‘richer, fussier sorts of travellers’ – a move that resulted in a much ‘slicker’ and ‘snappy’ guidebook format without the traditional long opening sections on local history and economics.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, LP moved more forcefully into the traditional guidebook markets of North America and Europe and engaged in an aggressive pricing war with their nearest rivals, the *Penguin*-owned *Rough Guide*. Such a move prompted one of LP’s board members to exclaim proudly, ‘*Penguin* is one of the most ruthless media organisations in the world – it’d be happy to squash us like a bug. But Tony is the Rupert Murdoch of the alternative travel space. He knows how to squash back.’<sup>52</sup> Such a determined corporate mindset allowed Wheeler to suspend all of LP’s charitable donations after the SARS crisis, the bombings in Bali and Mombassa, and the Iraq war in 2003, claiming that ‘at the moment, we need every penny’.<sup>53</sup> As with all prominent ethical brands, LP has succeeded by directing its customers away from the ruthless ‘Murdoch-like’ business practices that enable it to remain profitable, and encouraging them to focus instead on the ethical image of the company. What concerns me is how LP masks its corporate objectives by foregrounding its ethical credentials – as if the millions of LP travellers visiting exotic Third World destinations are somehow divorced from the way LP increases its profits. Perhaps the question should be posed another way:

<sup>47</sup> Friend, ‘The Parachute Artist’, p. 90. One of the consequences of LP’s commodification of such out-of-the-way places is its transformation of local economies, especially along the backpacking trail of India and Southeast Asia. For example, ‘LP is the bible in places like India. If they recommend the Resthouse Bangalore, then half the guesthouses there rename themselves Resthouse Bangalore’, Mark Ellingham, founder of the *Rough Guides*, quoted in Friend, ‘The Parachute Artist’, p. 79.

<sup>48</sup> Sam Wollaston, ‘Free Wheelers’, *The Guardian*, 7 July 1998, ‘Features’, p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Wollaston, ‘Free Wheelers’, p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Friend, ‘The Parachute Artist’, p. 79; see also <[www.lonelyplanet.biz](http://www.lonelyplanet.biz)>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>52</sup> Mark Carnegie, an investment banker who sits on the board of LP, quoted in Friend, ‘The Parachute Artist’, pp. 86–7.

<sup>53</sup> Linda Anderson, ‘Travelling Man Reflects on his Time at LBS’, *Financial Times*, 8 September 2003, ‘Business Education’, p. 7.

should we ignore LP's corporate agenda because it donates 5 per cent of its profits to local charities? Do such ethical commitments somehow cleanse the company of its distasteful – but necessary – corporate objectives? The problem, it seems to me, is that LP's corporate agenda is pursued in a global capitalist marketplace, and therefore it cannot help but entrench the differences and inequalities endemic to that system. This is not necessarily a problem – many corporations currently operate with business models that are at odds with their stated ethical principles. The problem arises when companies like LP take a very public political stand that requires them to confront such contradictions.

### To go or not to go

Right around the time that young, Western LP travellers were flocking to Southeast Asia for some responsible independent travel, Burma was in the midst of political turmoil. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won 82 per cent of the vote in 1990, but power was never transferred from the military and she remains under house arrest. In 1995, Suu Kyi made her first request that tourists and the tourism industry should stay away from Burma – a significant claim in the context of the burgeoning backpacker market establishing itself in the region. Burmese pro-democracy campaigners based in the UK (Burma Campaign UK) responded by organising a tourism boycott around three principle claims: (1) that human rights abuses are linked directly to the Junta's efforts to develop a national tourism industry (for example, forced labour was used to build hotels and airports); (2) 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 (3) Burma's democratically elected government (the NLD) have asked explicitly for a tourism boycott.<sup>54</sup> Such political pressure made it very difficult for LP to promote its idea that responsible independent travel benefits everyone, especially those living under non-democratic regimes. By 1999, Suu Kyi explicitly highlighted the role of guidebooks in Burma's political struggle:

Guidebook writers should listen to their consciences and be honest about their motivations. Profit is clearly their agenda. It's not good enough to suggest that by visiting Burma tourists will understand more. If tourists really wanted to find out what's happening in Burma – its better if they stay at home and read some of the many human rights reports there are.<sup>55</sup>

While *Rough Guide* and *AA* withdrew their Burma guides, LP continued to claim that their brand of responsible independent tourism would ultimately benefit Burma and refused to give in to the tourism boycott. In response to the suggestion that LP knows more about what Burma needs than the Burmese themselves, Suu Kyi made an even firmer response:

<sup>54</sup> See 'The Tourism Boycott' on BCUK; available at: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/tourism.php>, accessed 4 October 2006.

<sup>55</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi quoted in BCUK press release, 26 May 2000; available at: [http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/more.php?id=79\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_M](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/more.php?id=79_0_1_0_M), accessed 4 October 2006.

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. To suggest that there's anything new that tourists can teach the people of Burma about their own situation is not simply patronising – it's also racist.<sup>56</sup>

Despite such public claims from Suu Kyi, LP continued to defy the boycott and released a new guidebook to Burma in November 1999. However, they included a two-page section outlining the debate about whether or not to go to Burma which ultimately – and unsurprisingly given their cultivation of independence and choice – left it up to the LP travellers to decide for themselves.<sup>57</sup> Reasons to go included giving much needed income to local communities, the idea that Human Rights abuses would be less likely to occur if foreigners were present, the suggestion that the Junta had modified its behaviour after negative reports from travellers, and that isolating Burma would actually strengthen the Junta's power. Reasons *not* to go echoed the BCUK's tourism boycott: tourism gave a stamp of approval to the regime, the opposition had asked that tourists stay away, the government kept tourists away from areas where forced labour and repression were occurring, and it was difficult to avoid government-run tourist facilities. Even though they presented the debate in a supposedly neutral fashion, LP were very clear about their own position with regards to Burma – travellers should go because the benefits would outweigh the drawbacks.

In May 2000 BCUK joined forces with the NGO Tourism Concern to launch a public boycott against all LP publications until the company withdrew its Burma guidebook from the market. They dumped hundreds of unwanted LP guidebooks on the company's London doorstep and launched a postcard campaign saying 'The cost of a holiday in Burma could be someone's life'.<sup>58</sup>

In addition, they refuted some of the claims made in LPs two page ethical debate, including the suggestion that forced labour was on the wane – according to the United States Department of Labour and the International Labour Organization, forced labour continues in Burma. In response to this action, Wheeler was defiant: 'This campaign actually makes me more determined. I am not going to be told by anyone what I can publish.'<sup>59</sup> To counter bad publicity generated by the actions of BCUK and the wider tourism boycott, LP started publicising its charitable work in Southeast Asia, especially around the Burmese border. This included a press release detailing a large donation made to the Burma Relief Centre on the Thailand/Burma border. When the Centre learned of the BCUK's actions, however, they realised that LP's donation was a publicity stunt aimed at resuscitating the company's public image:

[learning of the boycott] has led us to question your organization's motives in donating to us. It appears that you had intended to publicise the donation to offset criticism of your

<sup>56</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi quoted in BCUK press release, 1 March, 1999; available at ([http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/more.php?id=90\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_M](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/more.php?id=90_0_1_0_M)), accessed 4 October, 2006.

<sup>57</sup> Tony Wheeler, Joe Cummings, Michael Clark, *Myanmar (Burma)*, Lonely Planet Publications, November 1999; and Tina Gauduin, 'Blood Ties', *The Times Magazine*, 10 January 2004, p. 34.

<sup>58</sup> Permission to reprint the postcard image, 'The cost of a holiday in Burma could be someone's life', granted by Burma Campaign UK, 19 July 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Desmond Balmer, 'Burma guidebook publisher stands firm against boycott', *The Observer*, 28 May 2000, 'Escape', p. 4.

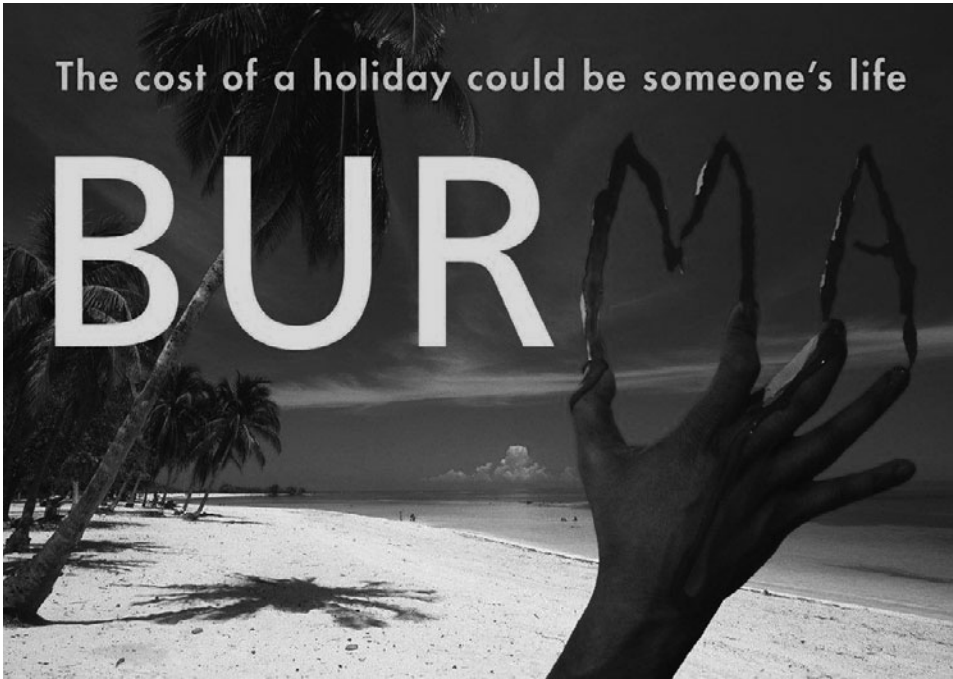


Figure 1. 'The Cost of a Holiday in Burma Could be Someone's Life' accessed at <http://www.burmacampaign.org/lukle-mail.html> (permission granted by BCUK 19 July 2007).

organization's promotion of tourism in Burma . . . We realise that we were mistaken in accepting your donation, and would like to return it immediately.<sup>60</sup>

Despite being included in a much-publicised 'dirty list' of 70 companies still doing business with Burma, LP published an updated guidebook to Burma in 2002.<sup>61</sup> The following year, the political struggle in Burma intensified as a pro-government militia ambushed a convoy carrying Suu Kyi and the NLD leadership, killing 100 NLD activists and supporters. In response, the British government wrote to all travel organisations and businesses with links to Burma and asked them to end their involvement with the country. Later that year, Wheeler repeated his call that more tourists should go to places like Burma in order to reveal to the rest of the world what was going on. In the same interview, he admitted that his handling of the LP boycott was a tactical error: 'It has been a complete eye opener, we handled it badly and if I was going to go through it all again I would be much more upfront and forceful about it than I was. We were too apologetic about it.'<sup>62</sup> As companies like British American Tobacco pulled out of Burma, LP soon topped the 'dirty list' of companies still doing business there. In early 2005 Tony Blair joined 70 UK celebrities and public figures in renewing the tourism boycott in the 'I'm not going' campaign: 'I

<sup>60</sup> Letter to LP from Burma Relief Centre in BCUK press release, 13 June 2000, 'Lonely Planet's attempt to offset criticism of its Burma guide backfires'; available at: [http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/more.php?id=80\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_M](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/more.php?id=80_0_1_0_M), accessed 5 October, 2006.

<sup>61</sup> Terry Maccalister, 'Rights Activists Put 70 Firms on Burma "Dirty List"', *The Guardian*, 18 December 2002, 'City Pages', p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> Anderson, 'Travelling Man', p. 7.

would urge anyone who may be thinking of visiting Burma on Holiday to consider carefully whether by their actions they are helping to support the regime and prolong such dreadful abuses.<sup>63</sup> LP's response was to release its most up to date guidebook (2005) which now has a full nine pages of information on the debate about whether or not to go, including an assessment of the tourism boycott itself. Significantly, the new guidebook includes a list of tourist sites that require a government entrance fee, and provides details of where your money goes when you spend it in Burma.

With this last publication, it seems to me that LP has effectively mobilised the discourse of humanitarianism to win the argument about tourism in Burma. LP travellers can now satisfy themselves that they are *not* supporting the Junta when they travel to Burma; rather, they are putting much needed hard currency *directly* into the hands of needy local people and therefore strengthening grass-roots democracy. By visiting Burma, LP travellers are not just responsible, independent and ethical, they are also helping the Burmese people fight for freedom. This suggests that the key protagonists in restoring Burmese democracy are *not* the NLD or even Suu Kyi herself – they are young Western backpackers going into Burma with their LP guidebooks, dispensing their wealth and coming out again to reveal its horrors to the rest of the civilised world. The privilege and conceit of this position became glaringly obvious when travel writer Dea Birkett – a Wheeler champion and previous LP author – spoke out in favour of LPs position on Burma:

The simple, delightful notion that we go on holiday to have fun has been hijacked. Today, taking a break – the very same thing that was once seen as an antidote to the overwork and stress of our everyday lives – is ridden with trouble and torment . . . But aren't holidays supposed to be carefree times, for suntans and self-indulgence? Is it really such a crime to seek out somewhere where you can simply enjoy yourself? Is spreading on factor 10, rather than reading up on the local medieval history and contemporary political systems, the sign of a lesser soul? Does every annual leave have to be an educational experience or a payback for the harm we westerners have done? . . . Tourism Concern and Burma Campaign's moral outrage is designed to make us feel bad about being good to ourselves, Lonely Planet's attitude is otherwise. It sees travel as a big adventure, to be embraced rather than agonised over. The guide book publisher should be congratulated for encouraging us all to wander into the world with our eyes, as well as our minds, wide open.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> BCUK press release, 1 February 2005, 'Tony Blair and 70 Celebrities Boycott Burma', available at: ([http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/more.php?id=150\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_M](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/more.php?id=150_0_1_0_M)), accessed 4 October 2006.

<sup>64</sup> Dea Birkett, 'Trouble in the Paradise Industry', *The Observer*, 1 June 2000; a very public response to Birkett emerged in a joint letter by Sean Wein (PM, Burmese government in exile), journalist John Pilger and MEP Glenys Kinnock, 'Not to Travel is Better', *The Guardian*, 3 June 2000, p. 25. But the most impressive response came from journalist Nick Cohen who suggested that Birkett positions travellers as both *benefactors* who make the world a better place, and *victims* of the nasty campaign waged by BCUK and Tourism Concern. For Birkett, and for Wheeler, the real perpetrators are BCUK and Tourism Concern because they are imposing 'totalitarian' restrictions on the freedom of movement, and making rich Western tourists (who stay in Burmese hotels built by forced labour) 'feel bad about being good to ourselves.' Indeed, Wheeler made similar claims in a reply to British MPs supporting the tourism boycott: 'I was deeply shocked to receive your letter aligning yourself with people who believe in censorship and suppression of information' (meaning the BCUK, Tourism Concern and other tourism boycott campaigners), Mark Thomas, 'Room Service? Forced Labour Please': (<http://burmacampaign.org.uk/mtarticle.html>), accessed 5 October 2006. As Cohen rightly argues, such spurious claims of victimisation simply expose the privilege of the entire LP project: 'Discerning liberal consumers are now so self-confident and self-pitying that they pose, without irony, as the victims of Stalin and Hitler when anyone suggests they make the tiniest moral choice. It says so much about them,' Nick Cohen, 'Without Prejudice: Burma's Shame', *The Observer*, 4 June 2000, p. 35.



For Birkett, and for LP, travel is essentially an apolitical practice (that is, ‘not to be agonised over’) whose detrimental effects can be overcome if you travel properly (that is, the LP way). But the controversy over LP guidebooks to Burma reveals a great deal about the politics of LP’s ethical vision: LP values the human right of travel for its ethical community over everything and everyone else – including the human right of freedom so desired by the Burmese people.

### Communication and confrontation

Guidebooks construct a very specific form of communication that is heavily regulated by functionality (such as, do this, see this, sleep here). The point of this article has been to show how such simple imperative demands are saturated with assumptions about *who* is framing such communication, *who* is receiving these messages, and *who* is being written about. In the case of LP, it is predominantly Western writers providing information for other Western travellers about ‘exotic’ third world destinations. Given this arrangement, it is not difficult to position LP guidebooks as ‘hegemonic and imperialistic’ forms of communication that further marginalise the excommunicated masses of the world. However, such a reading is too simple because it ignores LP’s efforts to provide an alternative to damaging forms of mass tourism. With this in mind, I am more interested in examining LP’s form of responsible independent travel to see whether it produces cross-cultural communication outside of the colonial logic bolstered by mainstream tourist practices. What becomes clear is that by drawing from a prevailing discourse of humanitarianism, LP’s alternative ethical vision simply reworks the familiar binaries of self/other, guest/host, West/East through a more appealing logic of benefactor/victim. In this way, LP travellers do not encourage the global inequalities bolstered by the tourism industry – they *help* others by breaking down cultural barriers and spending their hard currency where it is most needed. In the process, LP travellers develop important cultural capital: they become well-travelled, culturally aware, cosmopolitan global citizens.

The problem, of course, is that the benefactor/victim logic of humanitarianism leaves the excommunicated masses of the world – those who are written about in LP guidebooks – in the same position: subordinate and silent. In effect, LP guidebooks are simply a manifesto for privileged Western travellers who masquerade as ‘alternative’ and ‘culturally sensitive’ while simultaneously entrenching familiar colonial logics. Indeed, as the case of the Burma guidebook demonstrates, LP is ultimately more concerned with guarding the rights of its wealthy consumers than it is about promoting human rights and democracies in the places those consumers visit. In the end, LP’s entire ethical vision is compromised by the discourse of humanitarianism whose benign message of ‘helping others’ is underscored by the profoundly unjust and damaging logic of benefactor/victim. Humanitarianism is simply another way for privileged Western travellers to ignore their own complicity in, and reproduction of, the unequal structures of power they are supposed to be alleviating. The ethical vision encouraged by LP is therefore an ethics without a politics – an ethics that positions the cross-cultural communication that takes place during travel in a power vacuum. This is what makes LP so seductive: such a benign

form of humanitarian travel effectively silences its uncomfortable colonial heritage, its parasitic reliance on the tourist industry, and its undeniably privileged readership. This duplicity, of course, is not unique to the LP series. What guidebooks as a whole do *not* do – and what they definitely *should* do – is force the reader to confront his/her own privileges and prejudices in the process of travel.<sup>65</sup> If LP were truly the ‘alternative’ guidebook it claims to be, it would develop and encourage a meta-discussion about the ethics *and* politics of its own brand of responsible independent travel instead of cultivating the sanctimonious position of the humanitarian benefactor/traveller.

<sup>65</sup> Currently, the only books that come close to forcing these difficult questions are the satirical *Jet Lag* guidebooks which poke fun at the generic conventions of traditional guidebooks; see Santo Cilauro, Tom Gleisner and Rob Stich, *Molvania: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), and *Phaic Tãn: Sunstroke on a Shoestring* (London: Quadrille Publishing, 2005).