Transnational Mobilities in Snowboarding Culture: Travel, Tourism and Lifestyle Migration

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Transnational Mobilities in Snowboarding Culture: Travel, Tourism and Lifestyle Migration

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ABSTRACT Drawing upon global ethnographic methods conducted in six countries over seven years, this paper offers the first in-depth examination of the transnational flows and corporeal mobilities in the contemporary physical culture of snowboarding. Focusing on the travel and migration experiences of various groups of snowboarders (that is, tourists, professional athletes and lifestyle sport migrants), and engaging recent work by human geographers, as well as Pierre Bourdieu’s key concepts of field, capital and habitus, this paper reveals fresh insights into the lived transnationalism and global migration of contemporary youth facilitated by the ‘action’, ‘alternative’ or ‘extreme’ sports economy.

KEY WORDS: Youth culture, action sport, travel, lifestyle migration, snowboarding

Global media cultures and patterns of consumption are changing contemporary youth cultural formations. According to youth cultural scholars Nayak and Kehily (2008), everyday cultural flows and mobilities of objects, images and information are ‘transforming young people’s identities in complex ways as they come to interact with and reconfigure processes of globalization’ (p. 32). Attempting to understand and explain these changes, researchers are increasingly offering insightful theoretical and discursive analyses of the transnational flows of youth cultural discourses, products and images across and within local, national and virtual spaces (for example, Barker et al. 2009, Horak 2003, Huq 2003, Nayak 2003, Nayak and Kehily 2008, Pilkington and Johnson 2003, Skelton and Valentine 1998, Wiles 2008). This article contributes to this emerging body of literature by offering one of the first in-depth examinations of transnational flows and networks in contemporary physical youth culture via a discussion of the corporeal mobilities of snowboarders.

Snowboarding is a good example of a contemporary transnational physical culture. Developing in a historically unique conjuncture of transnational mass communications and corporate sponsors, entertainment industries, and a growing affluent and young population, snowboarding has spread around the world at a
phenomenal rate, and far faster than many established sports and physical cultures. It has gone from a marginal activity for a few aficionados to an Olympic sport and global culture with mass appeal in the past four decades (see Thorpe 2007, 2011). Despite some resistance from early participants during the mid and late 1990s, snowboarding increasingly became controlled and defined by transnational media corporations like ESPN and NBC (Anderson 1999, Heino 2000, Humphreys 2003, Thorpe 2007). As snowboarding was exposed to international audiences via mass mediated events such as the X Games, Gravity Games and Winter Olympics,\(^1\) it began attracting an influx of participants from around the world, and from different social classes and age groups. Snowboarding has seen a 385% increase in participation between 1988 and 2003. There are currently more than 18.5 million snowboarders worldwide. While young, white males continue to constitute a dominant force in the core of the culture, snowboarding is attracting an influx of participants from around the world, and from different social classes and age groups, as well as females and minority groups (see Anderson 1999, Thorpe 2009, Thorpe 2010a). Despite many languages and countries of origin, many snowboarders read the same magazines, watch the same videos, follow the performances of some of the same athletes at international competitions and events, visit the same websites, buy equipment and clothing from many of the same companies, and overwhelmingly describe their experiences using the same jargon and express similar cultural sentiments.\(^2\) Thus, while local weather, terrain and socio-cultural factors continue to influence the experiences of snowboarders in different locations around the world, a discourse of transnationalism pervades the contemporary global snowboarding culture (also see Wheaton 2004a).

Approaching the sport from a position of privilege, many snowboarders also travel extensively – locally, nationally, internationally and virtually – in pursuit of new terrain, fresh snow and social interactions and cultural connections.\(^3\) According to Transworld Snowboarding journalist Jennifer Sherowski (2004), ‘when it comes to seeing the world, snowboarders are lucky’:

...we don’t have to vacantly watch it pass by outside the tour-bus window or through the camcorder scope like most people. Nope, the emptiness of ‘tourism’ is not for us, because we belong to a planet-wide culture that makes journeying to the remotest places the equivalent of visiting a pack of friends for a day of slashing it. You shred a place, you live it, you know it – you don’t just buy the postcard at the airport.

p. 106, emphasis added

Glossing over local, regional and national differences, as well as the logistical complexities and privileged nature of such travel opportunities, Sherowski (2004) continues to describe snowboarding as a ‘global culture’ that ‘transcends borders and language barriers’ (p. 106). Professional Norwegian snowboarder Terje Haakonsen also believes that ‘with people travelling and having friends all over the world… nationalism [has become] a really backwards-looking concept’ (cited in Benedek 2009, para. 12).\(^4\) Drawing inspiration from the burgeoning field of transnational migration and mobility studies (for example Burns and Novelli 2008, Cresswell 2006, Rojek and Urry 1997, Sheller and Urry 2004, Urry 2007, Wilson and Dissanayak 1996), and recent scholarship on sport-related migration (for example Carter 2011, Joseph 2011, Maguire and Falcous, 2010) this article explores how
these global connections are being experienced by snowboarders in and across different local, national, and virtual spaces. Focusing particularly on the corporeal mobilities of travelling snowboarders, it aims to reveal fresh insights into the lived transnationalism and global migration of contemporary (privileged) youth facilitated by the ‘extreme’, ‘alternative’ or ‘lifestyle’ sports economy (Thorpe 2010a, 2011, Wheaton 2004a, 2010).

The following discussion consists of three parts. The first offers a brief overview of some of the theoretical, conceptual and methodological approaches underpinning this study. The second presents findings from my multi-sited transnational fieldwork on the corporeal mobilities of different groups of snowboarders. More specifically, I examine the travel patterns of snow-sport tourists, professional athletes and core participants respectively. The third focuses on lifestyle-sport migrants’ lived experiences of transnationalism. Here I engage recent work by human geographers, and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) key concepts of field, capital and habitus, to enhance understandings of privileged youth’s lifestyle sport migration experiences. In particular, I examine the influence of such mobilities on identity construction and the development of a ‘transnational imaginary’ (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996) among committed snowboarders.

Understanding Corporeal Mobilities in Snowboarding Culture: Some Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

According to Rojek and Urry (1997) ‘a major reason for the actual and metaphorical significance of mobility’ in the social sciences is because ‘cultures travel as well as people’ (p. 11). Continuing, they explain that ‘knowing a culture involves work, of memory, interpretation and reconstruction’, and ‘almost always involves travel’ (Rojek and Urry 1997, p. 12). In their efforts to ‘know’ cultures and social groups in the early twenty-first century, anthropologists, sociologists and human geographers are critically engaging with an array of theoretical approaches to explain some of the profound changes in travel, mobility, migration, flow and displacement. Of particular relevance for this study of snowboarders transnational travel, tourism and lifestyle sport migration experiences is Urry’s (2000) recent ‘sociology of mobilities’ paradigm:

Some of the diverse mobilities that are materially transforming the ‘social as society’ into the ‘social as mobility’ include imaginative travel, movements of images and information, virtual travel, object travel and corporeal travel. The consequence of such diverse mobilities is to produce what Beck terms the growth of ‘inner mobility’ for which coming and going, being both here and there at the same time, has become much more globally normal.

Advocating a ‘movement-driven social science’ (Urry 2007, p. 43) that recognizes the ‘exceptional levels of global interdependence’ and the ‘fluidity and malleability’ of contemporary social phenomena, Urry (2000) calls for ‘more mobile theorizing’ and greater ‘academic mobility’ across disciplinary borders (p. 186). Thus, in my research on the transnational networks, flows and mobilities in snowboarding culture, I engage in some ‘academic migration’ of my own; I cross borders between the fields of youth cultural studies, social and cultural geography, tourism studies,
migration studies, and sociology of sport and physical culture. Urry (2000) also believes ‘new rules of sociological method’ are needed to explore the ‘intensely mobile hybrids that roam across the globe and help to create a self-reproducing global order’ (p. 187). Thus, to understand the diverse mobilities within global physical youth culture, I draw upon an idiosyncratic multi-methodological transnational ethnographic approach.

**Researching Physical Cultural Mobilities: Doing Transnational Ethnography**

Most traditional ethnographies of youth and action-sport cultures have focused on a particular site in one moment in time (such as the punk scene in London during the 1970s; a local skateboarding subculture in Southern California in the early 1990s). However, in light of fundamental transformations of space, place and time, anthropologists and sociologists are increasingly calling into question traditionally defined ethnography as an ‘intensively-focused-upon single site of ethnographic observation and participation’ (Marcus 1995, p. 96). They urge scholars to embrace more broad-based research strategies, what some variously refer to as ‘globalizing methods’ (Stoller 1997), ‘mobile ethnography’ (Marcus 1995, Fincham, McGuinness and Murray 2010), multi-site ‘transnational fieldwork’ (Knowles 1999), and ‘global ethnography’ (Burawoy et al. 2000, Hendry, 2003).\(^5\) Arguably, transnational ethnography provides us with new tools to begin studying the flows of youth cultural commodities, images, discourses, power and populations across local, regional, national and international fields (Canniford 2005, Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003, Nayak and Kehily 2008).\(^6\) Of course, there is a plethora of ways in which globally sensitive ethnographies of contemporary youth and physical cultures may transpire. To illustrate the potential of such an approach, I offer a brief description of the global ethnographic methods employed in my research on transnational mobilities in snowboarding culture.

With the goal of examining the values, practices and interactions of snowboarders in local snow-sport cultures, as well as the flows of people, objects, value systems, information and images within and across these places, I conducted 15 ‘ethnographic visits’ – ranging from one week to one month – in an array of snowboarding communities and ski resorts in Canada (Whistler), France (Chamonix, Tignes), Italy (the Dolomites), New Zealand (Methven, Ohakune, Queenstown, Wanaka), Switzerland (Saas Fee, Zermatt), and the United States (Mt Hood, Oregon; Salt Lake City, Utah; Telluride, Colorado) between 2004 and early 2010. Each field was distinct in its social, cultural, political and natural geography, and offered different insights into the local, regional, national and transnational flows and connections in the global snowboarding culture. Attempting to understand how the ‘global forces, connections and imaginations’ (Burawoy et al. 2000) were being experienced in and across these local snowboarding fields, observations were made in natural settings both on and off the snow, including lift lines, chair lifts, resort lodges, snowboard competitions, prize-giving events, video premiers, bars, cafes, local hangouts, snowboard shops, bus shelters, train stations and airports. During this fieldwork, I observed, listened, engaged in analysis and made mental notes, switching from traveller to snowboarder to researcher depending on the requirements of the situation.\(^7\)

As well as making observations and jotting notes in various social and snow-covered environments, I was also a participant. For Burawoy (2000), global ethnographers should become ‘the living embodiment’ of the processes they are studying by ‘continually switching places [and] moving among sites within the
field’ (p. 4). Indeed, travelling on the same buses and trains, shopping in the same supermarkets, frequenting many of the same internet cafes and snowboard stores, waiting in the same queues for ticket sales and chair lifts, staying in the same youth hostels and backpackers, and carving down the same snowy slopes as many of the participants in this study, my multi-sited ethnographic approach was a form of ‘sensual research’ that offered new opportunities for experiencing, observing and sharing the bodily and social pleasures, as well as pains and frustrations, inherent in snowboarding and snow-related travel (Evers 2006, p. 239).

Each of the locations visited for this project posed different opportunities and challenges (such as language, localism, cultural access, accommodation, pre-existing contacts in the field, funding). According to Stoller (1997), the key to doing research in complex transnational spaces is ‘suppleness of imagination’ (p. 91). Thus, I attempted to respond and adapt flexibly to the unique conditions of each field, and remain open to a wide variety of relationships and interactions as they arose in various locations. Different ethnographic methods became more important when conducting research in some spaces and places than others. For example, language barriers in France, Italy and Switzerland made the communicative and auditory aspects of fieldwork more difficult. Thus, while conducting fieldwork in social spaces, such as lift lines or resort cafes, my observations became much more important in these destinations – I paid more attention to the signs and symbols, posturing and interactions of snowboarding bodies, as well as the tone and inflections of voices. In this way, it was typically the ‘circumstance that defined the method rather than the method defining the circumstance’ (Amit 2000, p. 11).

Research is a process that occurs through the medium of a person – ‘the researcher is always and inevitably present in the research’ (Stanley and Wise 1993, cited in Wheaton 2002, p. 246). This was certainly true in this project. Prior to commencing this study, I had already spent approximately 600 days snowboarding on more than 30 mountains in New Zealand, Canada and the United States. Between 1999 and 2004, I held many roles in the snowboarding culture (novice, weekend warrior, lifestyle sport migrant) and industry (semi-professional athlete, snowboard instructor, terrain-park employee journalist). Arguably, my past experiences as a snowboarding migrant greatly facilitated my ability to recognize appropriate methods, relevant sources and significant themes, as well as respond and adapt flexibly to different types of relationships and interactions in the field. Of course, lifestyle-sport migration and travelling for the purposes of social research are underpinned by different motives and goals, and require different sets of skills and knowledge. However, my ‘suppleness of imagination’ partly gained from previous participation in the transnational snowboarding field helped make this project feasible within tight time and fiscal constraints. But as Amit (2000) points out, the ‘melding of personal and professional roles in ethnographic fieldwork’ can also make for a ‘messy qualitative experience’ which ‘cannot readily or usefully be compartmentalized from other experiences and periods in our lives’ (p. 7). Thus, throughout my transnational fieldwork, I self-consciously reflected on my constantly shifting positions as an (increasingly less) active snowboarder and a young, white, heterosexual, middle-class female researcher and academic from New Zealand, and how these roles influenced the theoretical and empirical development of the study. While the focus of this research is the transnationalism of ‘others’, it is important to note that my own privileged transnational experiences – as a snowboarder and researcher – influenced every phase of this study (Knowles 1999).
My ethnographic observations were developed in dialogue with 54 participants (28 female and 26 male) from an array of countries, including Australia, Canada, Europe, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, South Africa, Switzerland and the United States. Participants ranged from 18 to 56 years of age, and included novice snowboarders, weekend warriors, core boarders, professional athletes, an Olympic judge, snowboarding journalists, photographers, film-makers, magazine editors, snowboard-company owners, snowboard-shop employees and owners, snowboard instructors and coaches, and event organizers and judges. During the interviews, I asked participants to reflect on their beliefs about various aspects of the snowboarding culture and encouraged them to express their attitudes, ideas, perceptions and memories on different aspects of their local, national and international snowboarding experiences. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to four hours in length, depending on the willingness of participants. To accommodate the nomadic existence of many snowboarders, I also distributed follow-up interviews via email to many participants living or travelling in various countries. In conjunction with my multi-sited transnational fieldwork and interviews, I also gathered evidence from cultural sources, such as magazines, films and websites, to help deepen my understanding of cultural complexities of the global-local nexus in snowboarding. Some of these sources (such as guidebooks, travel stories in snowboard magazines and websites, films) also proved useful for my understanding of regions in which snowboarding is practiced but I have yet to visit (for example Alaska, China, Japan).

**Transnational Mobilities and Snow Border Crossings**

The contemporary snowboarding culture is highly fragmented – participants include professional athletes, devoted or ‘lifestyle’ participants, less-committed newcomers and novices, marginal participants (for example poseurs, weekend warriors) and various subgroups. With such cultural diversity, it is not surprising that the travel patterns facilitated by the ‘alternative’ or ‘extreme’ sports economy vary considerably. Here I build upon existing research on lifestyle or action sports (for example Booth and Thorpe 2007, Evers 2004; Evers 2010, Ford and Brown 2006, Ponting, McDonald, and Wearing 2005, Rinehart and Sydnor 2003, Wheaton 2004a; Wheaton 2004b), sports migration (for example Carter 2011, Maguire and Falcous 2010) and youth and travel more broadly (for example Deforges 1997, Skelton, Tracey and Valentine 1997, Vogt 1976, Wearing, Stevenson, and Young 2010), to offer a discussion of the corporeal mobilities and migratory practices of snowboarding tourists, professionals, and core participants, respectively. It is important to keep in mind, however, that while the travel practices and patterns vary considerably among these groups, snowboarders typically share a middle-upper class habitus (Bourdieu 1992). Thus, for many snowboarders, travel – real, virtual and imagined – is a highly valued, yet often taken-for-granted, part of their social location. Put simply, snowboarders are often able to consider possibilities, freedoms and opportunities for snow-related travel or lifestyle sport migration unavailable to those from less-privileged social fields.

**Snowboarding Tourism: From Hitchhikers to Helicopters**

For many years, snow-related travel was an expensive and privileged activity limited to upper-class skiers (Coleman 2004). Recent changes in the ski industry and international travel, however, have contributed to shifts in the social
demographics of snow-sport tourists. During the 1990s and early 2000s, ski fields and mountain resort destinations recognized snowboarding as offering the industry a new youth market and potential for ongoing economic prosperity. Attempting to further attract regional, national and international snowboarding patrons, many resort destinations began offering cheaper travel and accommodation options for the typically younger and less affluent (though still privileged) snowboarder, as well as developing events for niche groups (such as snowboarding competitions for university students, women’s snowboarding clinics, gay ski and snowboard weeks). Some airlines also re-tooled to better service the influx of snow-sport tourists. For example, in 2007 low-cost carrier Ryanair announced a new winter schedule ‘designed with skiers and snowboarders in mind’ (cited in Ski Tourism 2007, p. 5). Many travel companies also realized the economic potential in snowboarding tourism and began offering a wide range of snow-sport travel options, including budget or backpacker specials, long-weekend student deals, and all-inclusive family packages.  

It is important to note, however, that while international snow-related travel has become more accessible to some middle-class families, younger participants and budget travelers, other experiences (such as helicopter snowboarding) and locations (for example, Aspen, Colorado; St Moritz, Switzerland) remain remote, costly and exclusive. 

Despite steady economic growth during the 1990s and early 2000s, international winter-sport tourism in many countries has experienced a considerable downturn during the recent global recession. As Ralf Garrison, author of the Mountain Travel Research report, explains: ‘economic conditions had a significant impact on the long-distance, multi-day visitor’ (cited in Lewis 2009, Bouw 2009). Due to the rising cost of jet fuel, many airlines are also imposing baggage charges which are directly impacting snow travellers’ ‘decisions of where to travel and what to bring’ (Lewi 2008). The irony here, of course, is that despite growing diversity in the cultural demographics of snow-sport tourists over the past two decades, in the current socio-economic climate, international snow-sport travel may once again become an activity afforded by only the most privileged.

**Professional Snowboarders: ‘Living the Dream’**

The life of the contemporary professional snowboarder is indeed a privileged one, typically consisting of extensive national and international travel for competitions and events. Not dissimilar from professional golfers or tennis players, competitive snowboarders following the International Ski Federation (FIS) Snowboard World Cup or the Ticket to Ride (TTR) World Tour circuit compete at ski resorts in various countries, including Argentina, Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States of America. As a competitive athlete on the World Cup tour during the mid and late 1990s, Pamela reflects upon her hyper-mobility as follows:

I can’t remember all the places I have travelled to for snowboarding. […] Japan, Canada, USA, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France. […] Obviously some places are not so memorable – but each is connected by that sense of newness, adventure and trepidation. But travelling for competitions is pretty nerve-wracking, so you don’t get much of a chance to soak up the place and
be a tourist – you are preoccupied and focused on the competition preparation and trying to have an optimal competition experience.

personal communication, July 2008; emphasis added

Not all professional snowboarders, however, follow a strict international competition circuit. Some make a living from sponsorships with snowboarding companies who pay salaries based primarily on niche media coverage (including snowboarding videos and magazines). Some of these athletes are paid to travel to exotic and remote locations to pioneer new spaces and places (such as Alaska, Antarctica, Iran, Japan, New Zealand, Russia; see Barr 2007); their exploits are then covered in snowboard magazines, films and websites. The representations of idyllic transnational lifestyles (travel to exotic snowboarding destinations, financial independence, partying) of professional male, and some female, snowboarders, promoted by snowboarding companies and media, then work to create a compelling mythology for many cultural participants (also see Frohlick 2005, Kay and Laberge 2003). According to Chris Sanders, CEO of Avalanche Snowboards:

The dream is basically what the kids see when they look in the magazines and see Damian [Sanders] or Terje [Haakonsen]. They are great lifestyle icons. They have it great. It looks like their lives are 24-hour-a-day adventure. You get handed these plane tickets, you hang out with cool photographers, dye your hair however you want to, and you’re making money so your parents have no say in your life. It’s all sex, action, and glamour. To an 18-year-old snowboarder, this is the dream.

cited in Howe, 1998, p. 68

While the media and snowboarding companies work hard to (re)create the ‘dream’ of the transnational snowboarding lifestyle via extensive coverage and sponsorship of travelling professionals, in reality such opportunities are only afforded a select few. In pursuit of this ‘dream’ lifestyle, however, many others committed participants invest heavily (financially, physically, and in terms of time) in their own snowboarding journeys, and in so doing, support the global snowboarding economy.

Core Snowboarders as ‘Lifestyle-Sport Migrants’

The cultural demographics of participants at the margins of the snowboarding culture (for example, weekend warriors, novices) are shifting, yet young, privileged men and women continue to constitute a dominant force at the core of the snowboarding culture (see NGSA 2001, Thorpe 2010b). Typically in their late teens and early twenties, many core participants have yet to take on adult responsibilities (such as marriage, children, mortgages, long-term employment, and so on), and their commitment to snowboarding is such that it organizes their whole lives (see Wheaton and Tomlinson 1998). According to snowboarding journalist Jennifer Sherowski (2005):

Not everyone who rides a snowboard is a snowboarder but for those who do bear this illustrious title, it’s an undeniable way of life. High school ends, and the road starts calling – off to mountain towns and the assimilation into weird,
transient tribes full of people who work night jobs cleaning toilets or handing you your coffee in the early mornings, all so they can shove a fistful of tips in their pocket and ride, their real motives betrayed by goggle tans or chins scuffed by Gore-Tex. In this world, people don’t ask what you ‘do,’ they ask you where you work – knowing that what you do is snowboard, just like them, and any job you might have is simply a means for it.

Indeed, many core snowboarders are nomadic, travelling nationally and internationally to experience new terrain, meet new people, or ‘live the dream’ of the endless winter.

At the end of high school or tertiary education (or during a leave of absence from education or the workforce), committed snowboarders often migrate to mountain towns where they find accommodation and employment, and spend several months to many years practicing, playing and performing in the various physical (for example, mountains) and social (such as, bars, cafes, shops) spaces and places. Core snowboarders typically begin their lifestyle migration by moving to snowy destinations within their country of origin. For example, Canadian snowboarders living on the east coast often relocate to larger resorts in Alberta and British Columbia, and passionate snowboarders living in the North Island of New Zealand often move to mountain towns in the South Island, which host thriving international snowboarding scenes during the winter months and offer more opportunities for employment in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Some of the more fervent snowboarders follow the winter between hemispheres, thus becoming what Maguire (1996) termed ‘nomadic cosmopolitans’ (p. 339), or what I refer to as ‘seasonal lifestyle sport migrants’ (Thorpe 2010a, also see Wheaton 2004a, Wheaton 2004b). To facilitate and prolong their transnational snowboarding lifestyles, many pursue further training and education to obtain skilled employment in the snow sport industry, with some becoming highly proficient instructors, coaches, journalists, photographers, rental technicians, groomer drivers and/or competition judges. Despite the skilled nature of many of these jobs, the majority are not high-paying; they tend to be held by passionate snowboarders committed to the lifestyle rather than the economic rewards. In the words of top snowboarding photographer Trevor Graves: ‘If you’re shooting to maintain the lifestyle, it’s worth it. That’s all you can do with the time constraints anyway. It’s not a huge cash-maker, like fashion or rock photography. It’s really about living snowboarding’ (cited in Howe 1998, p. 107).

While committed snowboarders are travelling within and across many Western – and some Eastern (such as, China, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea) – countries, the transnational flows of youth cultural participants are stronger in some directions than others. Some salient flows of seasonal lifestyle sport migrants observed during my fieldwork and media analyses include Australian, British, New Zealand and Japanese snowboarders to Canada – particularly Alberta (for example, Banff) and British Columbia (for example, Whistler) and the United States particularly California (for example, Mammoth), Colorado (for example, Breckenridge) and Utah (for example, Salt Lake City); American, Australian, British, Canadian, European and Japanese snowboarders to resorts in the South Island of New Zealand, particularly Queenstown and Wanaka; and British snowboarders to French snow-sport destina-
tions such as Chamonix. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors contributing to the decisions of snowboarders to pursue a career as a seasonal lifestyle-sport migrant, it is important to note that the opportunities and motivations for youth to travel internationally in pursuit of the snowboarding lifestyle and employment in the snow-sport industry vary considerably and are influenced by an array of personal factors, such as nationality, class, parental support, sex, and age, as well as events and contingencies in the broader social, cultural, political and economic context.

The transnational mobilities of snowboarding lifestyle migrants are facilitated and constrained by various factors, including work and travel visas, travel and accommodation costs, employment opportunities and wages, languages and exchange rates. For example, the availability of temporary youth work visas among the Commonwealth countries facilitates the mobility of Australian, British, Canadian and New Zealand snowboarders, and J1 Visas enable tertiary students from an array of countries to spend five months working in ski towns in the US during their university holidays. A plethora of commercial services have been established to facilitate (and profit from) the growing number of middle-class students wanting to experience an international ‘working holiday’ at a ski resort (for example, Work USA, Work Canada; see Duncan 2008). In contrast to the mobilities available to young tertiary-education students, a recent quota on the number of H-2B visas, which permit internationals with the support of a US sponsor to work temporarily in the US, has significantly impacted the seasonal migration of skilled ski-industry employees.14 Recognizing the detrimental effects of this quota on the US snow sports industry, the National Ski Areas Association (NSAA) is actively lobbying Congress to reconsider this law. In the meantime, thousands of committed Australasian, European, South American and South African, skiers and snowboarders – many of whom have invested heavily in their ‘careers’ in the sport and industry and the establishment of long-standing relationships with host resorts in the US – must reconsider their travel, employment and lifestyle options. As this example illustrates, the mobilities of both transnational lifestyle-sport migrants and less privileged migrants are inextricably linked to the changing conditions of global capitalism, as well as the continuing power of nation-states.

Transnational Experiences of Lifestyle-Sport Migrants

In the final part of this article I engage recent scholarship in migration and cultural geography to further explore lifestyle sport migrants lived experiences of transnationalism. In so doing, I discuss some of the social, physical and affective experiences of seasonal sport migration. In particular, I draw upon Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus-field complex (Bourdieu 1992, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Kenway and McLeod 2004, McNay 1999, Mouzelis 2007, Thorpe 2009, Thorpe 2009, 2010b) to examine how the hyper-mobile snowboarding lifestyle influences some snowboarders’ sense of identity (national, cultural, gender), belonging and transnational reflexivity at various stages in their lives.

(Un)settling Experiences of Lifestyle-Sport Migration

For many first-time lifestyle-sport migrants, negotiating space within mountain towns and ski resort destinations can pose a number of practical, social and
financial complexities. Recalling the difficulties of sourcing and affording accommodation during his first season in an expensive New Zealand ski town, Thomas explained:

I was sleeping in my snowboard bag beside a guy’s bed. I barely knew the guy but for $40 a week I could sleep there. [...] It was in a basement and it was known as ‘the dungeon’ [...] It didn’t bother me that it was cold; I just slept in a beanie. On a different occasion I remember not having a bed, instead I had a deck chair. I was one hell-of-a moocher that season [...] bounding from couch to couch, thumbing rides, squeezing every penny.

personal communication, June 2008

Snowboarders arriving in a mountain town for their first season will typically be at the bottom of the ‘pecking order’ in terms of available accommodation and employment. But, due to the transient nature of most ski-town populations, opportunities for employment and accommodation tend to expand with each consecutive season. Those snowboarders who stay for the summer months, or return for subsequent winters, gain cultural and social capital within the local community and thus access to the more desirable, and highly sought-after, forms of accommodation (that is, warm, affordable, close to facilities) and employment (more flexible work hours, higher wages).

Typically from the middle and upper classes, many snowboarders approach the travel and migration experience with a sense of confidence and entitlement unknown to those from less privileged social positions. Nonetheless, it would be remiss to ignore the considerable social, financial and emotional investments they make in pursuit of the transnational snowboarding lifestyle. As New Zealand Snowboarder magazine editor Dylan Butt (2006) explains:

The effort that goes into organizing an overseas mission is pretty huge. The long hours of work to save enough money… The calls, emails and random hook-ups through friends of friends… Dragging bags off planes on to trains and buses, through cities, small towns and villages…

p. 16

For many core snowboarders, lifestyle-sport migration requires careful saving and extensive social networking and organization skills, which are often acquired during the enculturation process into the transnational snowboarding field. As Pamela explains:

If you really enjoy something and work really hard at it, you will find a way to financially survive. [...] I’ve learnt heaps of really good skills about saving and living cheaply. I’ve learnt lots of things from different snowboarders over the years, because there is quite a creative, ‘scamming element’, about how to get by.

personal communication September 2005
Further commenting on the ‘creative and entrepreneurial’ efforts of her fellow lifestyle-sport migrants during the 1990s, Pamela proclaimed:

Everyone was progressively forging and making their own careers and jobs. It was such a young sport, there was no one to follow, you had to make it up as you went along. Many of those guys and girls went on to set up their snowboarding companies or businesses in the snow-sport industry and are doing really well these days.

personal communication September 2005

To fund her snowboarding career and transnational lifestyle, Pamela founded her own snowboard-clothing company. The opportunity for some young women, such as Pamela, to travel independently and pursue careers in the transnational snow-sport industry is a recent phenomenon and deserves further comment.

Young Women and Lifestyle-Sport Migration

Much of the research on transnational migration and mobilities has been ‘gender blind’ (Pratt and Yeoh 2003). ‘Neither men nor women are treated as conscious gendered beings tracing new maps of desire and attachment as they make multiple, circular, return, or provisional journeys across transnational space,’ argue Pratt and Yeoh (2003, p. 159; see also Mahler and Pessar 2001). Attempting to remedy the ‘masculinist hypermobility’ in much of the scholarly work on transnationalism, feminist geographers are increasingly exploring questions about the gendering of transnational experiences and the effects of such experiences on gender relations (Pratt and Yeoh 2003, p. 159). In so doing, recent studies have shown that, while transnationalism can be an empowering process for some women, females tend to ‘move less freely or have more socially embedded, or encumbered, spatial experiences’ than men (Pratt and Yeoh 2003, p. 160). Many female snowboarders, however, are from privileged socio-economic backgrounds and, with access to critical material conditions – space, encouragement and legislation – unknown to previous generations and women from the working classes, they are pursuing careers as lifestyle-sport migrants with enthusiasm (Thorpe 2008).

Recent research on young women’s travel and tourism practices (as distinct from transnational mobilities and migration) suggests that independent solo travel provides some women with ‘opportunities to push the boundaries of constraint’ and to ‘find sources of inspiration, empowerment and self-development’ and ‘generate feelings of independence, freedom, self-reliance and confidence’ (Harris and Wilson 2007, p. 244). Indeed, for some female lifestyle-sport migrants, pursuing a career in the international snow-sports industry has the potential to be an empowering experience. Core Canadian snowboarder Jaimie, for example, believes leaving her home town after high school and migrating to a small resort in Alberta where she spent two seasons working on the mountain before travelling to New Zealand and Australia, ‘made me more adventurous’ and ‘gave me enough confidence to take my level-1 instructor’s course’ (personal communication, February 2005). New Zealand snowboarder Abby also attributes the positive social and psychological benefits of lifestyle-sport migration to Canada, America and Japan, as giving her the confidence to become the head coach of a women’s-only snowboard camp in New
Zealand (Butt 2006). Some female lifestyle-sport migrants develop highly creative, entrepreneurial, financial and organizational skills, which in some cases transfer into social fields outside of snowboarding.

Despite the newfound opportunities for international travel and professional careers in the snow-sports industry, many female migrants ‘retire’ earlier from the ‘back-to-back’ lifestyle than their male peers. A conversation with Erin, Kim and Lisa – three highly esteemed New Zealand snowboard instructors who have been doing consecutive winters between New Zealand and North America since the early 2000s – revealed some interesting insights regarding the dearth of elite-level female instructors and examiners in the international snowboarding industry. Observing the tendency for ‘even the most hardcore’ female participants to ‘drop out in their late twenties’ while male snowboarders ‘can keep going well into their thirties’, they offered the following comments:

It is quite hard to stay in the industry for a long time, whether it’s because you’re sick of travelling, or sick of being broke, or you’re ready to settle down. While doing back-to-back winters is awesome, it can take a lot out of you; you are always living out of a bag… you definitely can’t have 15 pairs of shoes like city girls [laughs].

Erin, personal communication, June 2008

Snowboarding is my priority right now, not boys. If I had met an American boy, or even a Kiwi boy, during a season then that would have been it: my career as an instructor would have been over. I’ve seen it happen to so many awesome female instructors. Lots of girls stop doing back-to-backs when they fall in love, whereas most of the boys I know don’t.

Kim, personal communication, June 2008

Another big thing with doing lots of back-to-back winters would be 6-month friendships. You meet the coolest, like-minded people who have travelled and love, love snowboarding, and you have these intense friendships, then at the end of the winter you all go your different ways. It can be really hard, emotionally, sometimes. But, after doing a few back-to-back winters you become desensitized to it

Lisa, personal communication, June 2008

Pamela also describes the financial and physical difficulties and personal sacrifices she made as a semi-professional athlete and lifestyle-sport migrant during the 1990s:

‘Living the lifestyle’ meant a small bag, not many possessions, all funds funneled into travelling to the next competition. [...] I was riding up to 200 days a year; I had chill-blains, constant aches and pains, and colds and flus that would last for months. My body never got to recover or get strong between
seasons… Doing back-to-back winters also puts a lot of strains on your relationships. It’s hard to maintain a long-term relationship when you are constantly on the move.

Continuing, however, Pamela proclaimed that through her transnational snowboarding experiences she developed ‘a sense of confidence that is priceless’: ‘I now know’, she adds, ‘that I can do things that other people think are impossible’ (personal communication, February 2005). Clearly, for many female lifestyle-sport migrants, ‘burdens are borne alongside opportunities, in different ways in different times, places and social locations’ (Pratt and Yeoh 2003, p. 160).

Seasonal Migration, Narratives of Transformation and Reflexivity

Lifestyle-sport migrants frequently recount dramatic and exciting stories of their journeys to snowy destinations abroad. These travel narratives take various forms, including verbal story-telling, written and photographic blogs, poems and short stories, and home-made videos; many of these travel stories refer to the geography of the location (such as the terrain, snow conditions) and psychology of the individual or group (feelings of fear, anxiety, excitement, flow), as well as socio-cultural dynamics (interactions and relationships with local residents or fellow travellers). Interestingly, many lifestyle-sport migrants’ narratives of transnational work, leisure and travel also reveal complex and fluid temporal-spatial patterns: ‘one year turned into seven pretty fast’; ‘those winters seemed to blur’; ‘summer disappeared off my radar and life just became one long wonderful winter’; ‘I was so focused on the next storm that I stopped structuring my year in terms of weeks and months… the weather maps were much more important than the calendar’ (field notes and personal communications 2008). As transnational lifestyle-sport migrants become embedded in the global processes and flows of the snowboarding culture and snow-sport industry, many experience similar ‘time-space rhythms’ (Burawoy 2000, p. 4). Lifestyle-sport migrants often become highly attuned to weather and seasonal patterns, such that they narrate their journeys in terms of winters, storms and total number of ‘on snow’ days per season. The number of ‘back-to-back’ or consecutive winters, and the places travelled for snowboarding, are important symbols of cultural commitment, and thus a regular topic of conversation among core snowboarders.

Not dissimilar from the travel narratives of other young budget travellers, many snowboarders also narrate journeys of self-growth and personal transformation (Noy 2004). For example, reflecting upon his previous lifestyle sport-migration experiences, one New Zealand snowboarder proclaims:

Looking back, the years when I was immersed in snowboarding had a huge impact on me. I think I gained a lot of confidence out of my experiences, and self-belief. There is something about moving to a ski town without a job or a place to live. If you can sort all that out, survive and have a great time, then you can do anything. It puts a lot of stuff in perspective. It made me think ‘if I can do this, what else can I do?’ It changed the future I saw for myself.

personal communication, June 2008
Arguably, for some participants, transnational migration can prompt self-growth and, in some cases, lead to greater personal and social reflexivity.

For privileged lifestyle-sport migrants, crossing local, regional and national ‘fields’ with different cultural, social and gender values, norms and rules has the potential to lead to moments of dissonance and tension, and thus a ‘more reflexive account of one’s location and habitus’ (Kenway and McLeod 2004, p. 525, Bourdieu 1992, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). As the following comments from Mel, Pamela and Adam suggest, international travel across local, regional and national fields, and interactions with snowboarders from different nationalities prompts some participants to reflect upon various aspects of their own habitus, including national identity, social privilege, and gender and race relations within their host and home countries. Committed New Zealand snowboarder, Mel, for example, attributes her snowboarding travel experiences with helping her reflect upon her privileged upbringing and position in society:

[Snowboarding] helped me push myself to places there’s no way I would’ve gone otherwise, and I’m not just talking about cliff drops, rails and booters [terrain features upon which snowboarding manoeuvres are performed]. I’m talking about people, places, and major attitude adjustments. I grew up on the Northshore, sheltered as, basically, a snob. But through the places snowboarding’s taken me, here and overseas, the people I’ve met, it’s made me a much more open and accepting person

personal communication, February 2005

During her transnational snowboarding experiences, Pamela witnessed a ‘really strong Japan-Canada-New Zealand triangle’, which prompted her to reflect upon national and cultural differences in group dynamics and social support, and gender expectations and opportunities:

I spent a lot of time hiking the half-pipe at Cardrona [New Zealand ski resort] when it was just me – a little white-European girl – and the rest were Japanese. I really noticed how positive and supportive they were of each other. If one of them falls, they would just say good stuff. I used to think how different this was to western culture, where we seem to be pretty good at tearing each other down. Trying new things is much more difficult if you think people are going to laugh and criticize you.

I always loved talking to the Japanese snowboarding girls hiking the pipe. At that time, it was a huge thing for them to be travelling alone and to ‘be snowboarders’. A lot of them were a bit older, too. It was so less expected for Japanese girls to travel than Kiwi girls, which kind of showed a lot more spirit for them to pursue the snowboarding lifestyle around the world

personal communication, September 2005

During his second season working at a ski resort in America, core New Zealand snowboarder Adam became aware of class and ethnic inequalities in his workplace that encouraged him to question race relations in his home country:
Working in the Food and Beverages department [...] gave me an interesting insight into all the stuff that goes on ‘behind the scenes’ of ski resorts. It was pretty much me and all the Mexican guys, which was awesome. They weren’t there for the same reasons as me – you know, the free season pass and to snowboard as much as possible – but we had lots of fun working together. Those guys really get treated like crap though – They get all the worst jobs and get paid the least. [...] When I went home I saw similar things happening for Maori people in our country, which I hadn’t really noticed before.

Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to further explore the potential effects and/or affects of such reflexivity. It is important to note, however, that for some lifestyle-sport participants, reflexivity regarding particular aspects of their habitus (for example, privilege) and/or social inequalities within local, regional or national social fields gained via their international travel and migration experiences can prompt empathetic, altruistic and/or political responses (see Thorpe 2009, Thorpe and Rinehart 2010).

While some lifestyle-sport migrants experience perceptions of self change, identity transformation and enhanced reflexivity via their corporeal mobilities, I am wary of romanticizing the effects of such transnationalism. Not dissimilar from other young budget travellers, many lifestyle-sport migrants appear to have developed ‘specific, well-stylized forms of narrating their travel experiences’ (Noy 2004, p. 79). In recounting their travel narratives, snowboarders often gloss over less-than-savoury aspects of their journeys, such as homesickness, experiencing injuries without adequate insurance, poor living conditions, low pay rates, or tensions between colleagues, housemates or local residents, and zealously endorse popular discourses of travel as facilitating self-growth, identity transformation and personal empowerment.

Moreover, while some lifestyle-sport migrants consciously negotiate their class, national and/or gender habitus across different fields, reflexivity is not an inherently universal capacity; some travellers are oblivious to local, regional and national differences. Young Australian male snowboarders, for example, are particularly notorious for their distinctive larrikin behaviour which they perform across all fields, often to the chagrin of local residents, other travelling snowboarders and some fellow Australian snowboarders. For example, a recent article in Australian/New Zealand Snowboarding magazine titled ‘Aussies behaving badly: Global thugs?’ vilifies the behaviour of young, predominantly male, Australians while overseas:

A mob of Aussies overseas can be heavy. When one swallows you, you truly feel like part of a team… on a mission to spread Australianess… indestructible… [But] when the smoke clears, and all the local women have been hit on, and the local men beaten and affronted, and the cranky Australasian mob tear off to the next town, there is only one thing that the locals can be sure of – that another wave is not far away. [...] Essentially – whether it’s from too much bravado, or too much booze, or just too many of us period – we may be ruining it for ourselves. That tired old adage of: ‘Go hard or go home’ will win us no friends.

Costios 2005, p. 15
The article concludes with the firm message: ‘Respect your hosts’ (Costios 2005, p. 15). The interesting point here is that, while some Australian snowboarders are unaware of, or indifferent to, the cultural tensions caused by their behaviour, others are mindful of problematic aspects of the hyper-masculine Australian habitus, and some act in ways to challenge, undercut or remedy such practices. For example, as a fellow travelling snowboarder, the male Australian magazine editor publicly condemns the reckless, hedonistic and narcissistic masculinities embodied by many of his countrymen. The following comments from the autobiography of professional US snowboarder Todd Richards (2003), offer another example of travelling snowboarders disrespecting local peoples and cultures:

Japanese skiers and snowboarders made their way down [the slopes of a ski resort in Hokkaido, Japan] in an orderly fashion, staying inside the ropes like cattle. […] The visiting snowboarders, on the other hand, ducked under (or aired over) the ropes and rode the amazing power between the runs. It was paradise. The ski patrol tried to stand between us and the closed powder fields. They’d blow whistles, wave their arms, and point at the rope saying, ‘No!’ We’d just dodge them, yelling, ‘I’m American!’

An older, and somewhat more reflexive, Richards (2003) concludes adding: ‘We were blatant assholes, and I feel bad about it now, but that’s how we were. It was mob mentality. One person did it, and everybody followed. These days, I have a greater respect for the Japanese people and their culture; if I have to break the rules, I do it very discreetly’ (p. 142). Clearly, there is ‘nothing inherently transgressive or emancipatory about transnationalism. Rather, the effects are contradictory and complex, and must be assessed within specific times and places’ (Pratt and Yeoh 2003, p. 159).

Lifestyle-Sport Migration and Affective Homecomings

Thus far, I have focused on the experiences of core snowboarders going ‘away’ to snowy places, but for some lifestyle-sport migrants the formation and metamorphoses of their transnational consciousness and national and cultural identities are intimately connected with conceptualizations of ‘home’. Far from a fixed and bounded location, ‘home’ – as symbolic meaning, as social relationship, as developed rhythms, and as physical place – is a ‘multi-layered, interactive and productive process’ (Wiles 2008, p. 123). For some scholars, transnational flows and mobilities are further complicating understandings of ‘home’ (for example, Morley 2000, Vertovec 1999). Certainly, for many lifestyle-sport migrants, coming or going ‘home’ – either temporarily or permanently – can prompt them to ‘renegotiate their entwined understandings of place and subjectivity’ (McNay 2005, p. 75, Knowles 1999, Wiles 2008).

For some lifestyle-sport migrants, understandings of ‘home’ become much more complex as their lives become increasingly transnational. As the following comments from Lisa suggest, for some lifestyle-sport migrants the familiarity of cultural norms, values, and relationships within the global snowboarding culture offer a symbolic and social ‘home’ while ‘away’ from their physical or spatial ‘home’:
I’ve done 15 winters in a row, between here [New Zealand], Australia, the US and Canada… all of them instructing. I usually go home for a week between winters. My parents kind of know the deal now. I arrive, unpack my bags, sleep for a couple of days, do my washing, get organized, see all my family, eat some good food, pack my bags and then head off again… back to my other home in the mountains with my snowboarding family.

personal communication 2008, emphasis added

‘Returning’ home from a snowboarding journey can also be a highly affective experience, as one New Zealand snowboarding migrant and journalist writes:

There’s nothing quite like returning to New Zealand after a winter overseas, and on the plane home emotions can be mixed. You might be dreading coming back after living it up in North America or Europe and having what can only be described as the ‘best time of your life’. On the other hand you’re probably looking forward to getting back to good food, friends and family. […] You may be returning home battered and bruised, dosed up on codeine with a broken wrist, tweaked shoulder or torn ACL, and facing the daunting task of rehab before the next season. Whatever the case… you can’t help but feel some kinda ‘butterflies in the stomach’ when you look down and see the Southern Alps, Mt Ruapehu or Mt Taranaki.

Westcot 2006, p. 18

For core Canadian snowboarder Aaron, temporarily returning ‘home’ can be a ‘frustrating’ experience:

I’ve spent 12 years riding in Whistler and five winters living there full-time. […] I’ve also travelled throughout most of Canada and the United States, as well as several countries in Europe, Japan, India, and South America for snowboarding. For so long I’ve lived in the mountains, and I’ve dedicated a huge part of my life to snowboarding. But when I go home at Christmas to visit my family, I’ll often run into old friends or seldom-seen relatives and it’s like we live on different planets. […] Sometimes I am so relieved to get back to Whistler where people understand snowboarding, and my friends get me

personal communication, 2008

Other transnational lifestyle-sport migrants describe the ‘home’ visit as prompting some reflection on lifestyle choices:

Coming back from a winter overseas and going home to [a small New Zealand town] on my way down south was always a weird reality check… Many of my mates from home hadn’t been overseas; in fact they had gone straight from school to work. They had nice houses, long-term girlfriends and wives, and some had kids. There was always a little part of me that would briefly wonder if I was doing the wrong thing. I always thought that it must be nice to have some money. I was living on a couch, borrowing blankets,
eating Weetbix for lunch, cutting my own hair. But many of my old friends,
particularly the ones who still lived in [name of home town] and were married
with kids, were really interested in my snowboarding stories… I even felt
there was some jealousy there, too.

Nathan, personal communication 2008

Thus, for some transnational lifestyle-sport migrants, coming ‘home’ from a winter
overseas can evoke affective and cognitive responses, and questions regarding
national identity, lifestyle and career decisions, and social relationships with family
and friends.

Transnational Lifestyle-Sport Retirement and (Im)mobility

In contrast to temporary homecomings in which lifestyle-sport migrants are still
‘moving’, retiring from a transnational career in the snow-sport industry and adopting
a less mobile lifestyle can raise different practical and emotional issues. The
transnational careers of lifestyle-sport migrants are often short-lived and, whatever
the cause of ‘retirement’ (for example, injury, social pressures to ‘grow up and get
a real job’, or adoption of more social responsibilities such as marriage, children,
mortgage, and so on), re-emplacement can be an emotional experience.17 Indeed,
some lifestyle-sport migrants describe experiencing physiological and socio-psycho-
dlogical difficulties transitioning out of the hyper-mobile transnational snowboarding
lifestyle and into a more permanent and/or structured existence:

When I stopped snowboarding it was really hard, but it was less the snow-
boarding and more the people I missed the most. […] Going back to univer-
sity after snowboarding more than 200 days per year for seven years was
incredibly difficult. I was always looking for a window to open. I couldn’t
handle being inside all day, everyday […] I had horrendous headaches.

Phillipa, personal communication, February 2005

While older or injured migrants may no longer be able, or willing, to organize their
whole lives around the ‘transnational’ snowboarding lifestyle, many continue to pur-
sue snowboarding-related careers and enjoy regular participation within local, regional
and national contexts. Many also plan regular trips to local ski resorts, or
family holidays to national and international ski resorts, or save up for short luxury
snowboarding adventures with groups of friends.

To facilitate their transition out of a career as a lifestyle-sport migrant, many par-
ticipants use new media (such as websites, live webcams) to access information and
maintain their ‘connection’ with the transnational snowboarding community. As
Jeremy, a recently retired lifestyle sport migrant, explains:

The homepages on my laptop are still set to display the local snow reports
because, if the snow is good, I will do everything I possibly can to get to the
mountain that day; I will call work, tell them I am taking a sick day or some-
thing, reschedule meetings… The websites sort of give me the ‘fix’ that I
need… If I know its crap on the mountain I can settle down and get on with
my day, but if I know it’s good and I’m not up there, I really struggle. I feel kind of itchy and agitated all day.

personal communication, May 2008

Continuing, Jeremy describes how his snowboarding media consumption changed with shifts in his lifestyle:

If anything I am more actively seeking information on snowboarding than I was when I was a core boarder. While I was snowboarding and travelling a lot, my focus was keeping up with what was happening internationally, mostly America. Now I buy the New Zealand snowboard mags and go on the local websites much more. I think that has to be because I want to stay connected, particularly to the local scene.

personal communication, May 2008

As Cohen (1996) explains, transnational identities ‘no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims’: ‘in the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination’ (p. 516, cited in Vertovec 1999, p. 450). Indeed, many current and former lifestyle-sport migrants use new forms of electronic communication (such as personal blogs, email, Facebook, Skype, YouTube), as well as cultural artefacts (for example, snowboarding magazines, websites and films) to maintain – real, virtual and imaginary – connections with local and global snowboarding cultures.

Even for those long retired from the transnational snowboarding lifestyle, memories and stories of places travelled and experiences shared with close friends remain in heavy – verbal, virtual and cognitive – circulation (for example, ‘I will spend much of the day at work dreaming of the snow and thinking back to the old days …’), and continue to influence their sense of identity and personal history for many years (see Robertson et al. 1994). According to Appadurai and Breckenridge (1989), diasporas always leave a trail of ‘fractured memories’ about ‘another place and time’ which can ‘create new maps of desire and of attachment’ (p. i). Moreover, when combined with an awareness of multi-locality, such memories can result in ‘a refusal of fixity often serving as a valuable resource for resisting repressive local or global situations’ (Vertovec 1999, p. 451). For example, after more than a decade ‘following winter from mountain to mountain around the world’, Ste’en no longer organizes his life around snowboarding, yet he believes ‘snowboarding will always be part of who I am… The freedom of the lifestyle and individual expression in snowboarding is residual and it remains a defining feature in the way I live my life. I won’t ever settle for the 9–5 lifestyle because I know there are other ways of doing it, if you can be creative and flexible’ (personal communication, July 2008).

As these enduring transnational connections suggest, for lifestyle-sport migrants ‘movement and attachment is not linear or sequential but capable of rotating back and forth and changing direction over time… and depending on context’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, p. 1011). In addition to personal transformations of national, gender and/or cultural identity, memory, reflexivity and other modes of conscious-
ness, for some participants collective meanings and perspectives of lifestyle-sport migration results in a ‘transnational imaginary’ (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996) that ‘criss-crosses [sic] societal borders in new temporal-spatial patterns’ (Urry 2000, p. 186). Indeed, many lifestyle-sport migrants share similar experiences of transnational mobility (such as creative entrepreneurial and frugal practices, pressures to ‘get a real job’, time-space-seasonal rhythms) which produces a ‘common consciousness’ or an ‘imaginary coherence’ (Vertovec 1999, p. 450), such that many committed snowboarders concur with claims that they belong to ‘a planet wide culture’ that ‘transcends borders and language barriers’ (Sherowski 2004, p. 106).

Transnational Physical Youth Cultural Mobilities: Some Final Thoughts

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach and employing transnational ethnographic methods, this paper offered an examination of the travel, lifestyle and sporting experiences of contemporary physical cultural participants via a discussion of the multiple corporeal mobilities in snowboarding culture. Snowboarders do not constitute a homogenous group; participants approach the activity with different motives and values depending on an array of factors including style of participation, level of commitment, skill level, age, sexuality, race, class, gender, nationality, and so forth. Moreover, individual’s goals and styles of participation change during their lifetime. Within this highly fragmented and dynamic contemporary snowboarding culture, travel patterns vary considerably, ranging from short road-trips to the local ski resort, to budget international holiday packages, to luxury snowboarding adventures to exotic and remote locations, to working holidays and seasonal lifestyle migration between the hemispheres. Put simply, the contemporary snowboarding culture consists of multiple mobilities and ‘a wide variety of actors’ with ‘varying investments in, experiences of and expressions of transnationalism’ (Crang, Dwyer and Jackson 2003, p. 449). Importantly, however, while international snow-related travel to mountains and ski resort destinations has been the focus of this discussion, it is important to keep in mind that such mobilities are epiphenomena to the experience of snowboarding itself. For most snowboarders, the corporeal mobility of sliding down a snow-covered slope is at the core of their experiences and the central impetus behind their transnational travel, tourism and lifestyle sport migration.

While there are many ways of ‘being transnational’ (Smith 2002) in the global snowboarding field, these physical, social and psychological experiences are always intimately linked to place. Snowboarders’ transnational experiences, acts and behaviours ‘work through – not over or apart from – locally embedded social relations’ (Pratt and Yeoh 2003, p. 163). In other words, their diasporic experiences are ‘inextricably entangled with the material and social relations’ (Crang et al. 2003, p. 45) in local spaces and places, and particularly locations in ski resorts destinations. Indeed, with the diversity of mobilities in contemporary snowboarding culture, ski resorts and mountain destinations, once the exclusive domain of upper-class skiers, are becoming increasingly ‘complex, multi-dimensional and multiply inhabited’ spaces (Jackson, Crang and Dwyer 2004, p. 3, Baerenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen and Urry 2004, Pries, 2001). This is particularly true for some key locations such as Chamonix (France), Queenstown (New Zealand) and Whistler (Canada) which host a steady flow of action sport enthusiasts from around the world, and from different activities (such as snowboarding, skiing, mountain biking, skateboarding, climbing, kayaking, hang-gliding, base-jumping) and positions within these physical cultures.
(athlete, lifestyle sport migrant, tourist, novice, poseur), such that I have termed them ‘transnational physical cultural hot spots’ (Thorpe 2010a, 2011). Arguably, what distinguishes these transnational destinations from other popular national and regional winter locales, is that they each offer a unique combination of social (quality restaurants, cafes and nightlife) and physical geographies (such as snow conditions, weather and mountain terrain), as well as established infrastructure (relatively easily accessible via international airports and regional transport; accommodation, user-friendly village design, and so on). According to Reed (2005), these places are among ‘snowboarding’s great cathedrals... places of pilgrimage, where like-minded devotees from all over the world congregate during the holy season of winter’ (p. 184). Indeed, every year hundreds of thousands of action sport enthusiasts travel to these unique destinations with many different motives, goals and intentions. While many are drawn to these sites by the desire to experience new, more challenging, or culturally-infamous, terrain; others are attracted by the opportunities for social interactions with like-minded youth and cultural participants.

Of course, the global and local flows of tourists, and physical cultural enthusiasts, are unique to each transnational social space, facilitated and constrained by various factors, including weather and snow quality, availability of transport and accommodation, exchange rates, media coverage of the destination, work and travel visas, language barriers, global and national economic conditions. The multiple mobilities and interactions within and across various snow-covered (for example terrain parks, chairlifts, backcountry) and urban (such as car parks, cafes, bars and nightclubs, shops, and so on) sites within these transnational mountain destinations, however, raise some common questions: Whose place is this? Who has access to social and physical resources? How do different individuals and groups negotiate space in these fields? How do individuals elaborate or conceal some markers (for example nationality, gender, race, class) within these spaces in attempts to preserve or create status within the local transnational community? The cultural value systems within local fields are important because they determine who gets access and priority when natural (for example, fresh powder) and socio-economic (for example, accommodation, jobs) resources are limited. As I explain elsewhere, local residents, tourists and lifestyle sport migrants employ an array of embodied practices to establish notions of self and the group, and a sense of belonging, and demarcate who belongs and who is excluded in these mountain resort destinations (see Thorpe 2011). Cultural hierarchies are contested, negotiated and reinforced in various spaces and places as individuals and groups struggle for territory and eminence within hierarchically-structured transnational physical cultural fields. In so doing, individuals and groups in transnational physical cultural spaces ‘experience multiple loci and layers of power and are shaped by them’ or ‘act back upon them’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, p. 1013).

In sum, I concur with Jackson et al. (2004) who argue that, while borders and boundaries are, in some places and for some people, becoming ‘increasingly porous’, we ‘must not let the often elite ideology of transnationalism blind us to the practical and emotional importance of attachments to and in place’ (p. 7). Thus, I look forward to further research that builds upon the discussion offered here, and continues to explore both the macro-mobilities and transnational migration of physical cultural participants, and the micro-mobilities and everyday interactions within transnational physical cultural spaces. Arguably, such scholarship has the potential to contribute to our understanding of the politics of migration, and feed into ques-
tions about how youth develop a sense of belonging and ownership of place and space in ownership of place and space into the twenty-first century.

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**Notes**

1. In 1998, ESPN’s different sport channels beamed the X Games to 198 countries in 21 languages (Rinehart 2000). According to a Leisure Trends survey, 32% (nearly 92 million people) of the United States population watched the 2002 Olympic snowboarding half-pipe competition in which Americans won gold (Ross Powers), silver (Danny Kass), and bronze (J.J. Thomas) in the men’s event (this was the first US winter Olympic medal sweep since 1956) and gold (Kelly Clark) in the women’s event. Of those viewers 18.6 million Americans said they wanted to try snowboarding (Snowboarding And 2004). More recently, it has been reported that NBC coverage of the men’s snowboard half-pipe final drew more than 30 million viewers in the US alone (Dillman 2010) (see Thorpe and Wheaton 2011).

2. According to Doug Palladini, publisher of *Snowboarder* magazine, snowboarding magazines are ‘not just something you pick up at the airport’; to core participants they are ‘the bible’ (cited in How 1998, p. 104). Cultural commentator Rob Reed (2005) also describes snowboarding films as ‘windows into the culture of snowboarding. Through these films viewers can connect with the best [snowboarding] personalities, styles, destinations, and tricks, taking virtual journeys around the world of snowboarding, living it, if only for an hour or so’ (p. 114). Niche snowboarding websites also offer important spaces for the sharing of information and communication across local and national fields. The world’s largest snowboarding website, for example, www.snowboard.com hosts 550,000 registered members – 313,000 from the USA, 98,000 from Canada, and 144,000 from other countries around the world (see Thorpe 2011).

3. According to the authors of *Snowboarding the World*, ‘Snowboarders are, by definition, travellers. Unless you’re lucky enough to live at the foot of a mountain, the typical snowboarding trip means planning an overseas journey...’ (Barr, Moran and Wallace 2006, p. 3); A recent online survey of more than 2000 snowboarders from around the world showed approximately 43% of respondents had snowboarded at least once in a foreign country (Poll Results 2006).

4. For some committed participants, this discourse of transnationalism is such that a global snowboarding identity takes precedence over more traditional notions of identity (such as nationality). For example, when Haakonsen was asked to explain his highly controversial decision not to compete in the 1998 Winter Olympics, his response revealed stronger identification with the global snowboarding culture, and a transnational snowboarding company, than his nation state: ‘Norway is a great country to live, but it’s never supported me like my sponsors. My flag should be Burton not Norway’ (cited in Reed 2005, p. 135; also see Thorpe and Wheaton 2011, Wheaton 2004a).

5. Of course, anthropologists have long studied nomadic people, travellers and transhumant populations (Hendry 2003). The recent emergence of ‘multi-sited fieldwork’ or ‘global ethnography’, however, is located within ‘new spheres of interdisciplinary work’, including media studies, science and technology studies, cultural and social geography, and cultural studies broadly (Marcus 1995, p. 95). According to Burawoy (2000), the agenda of global ethnography is to ‘replace
abstract globalization with a grounded globalization that tries to understand not only the experience of globalization but also how that experience is produced in specific localities and how the productive process is a contested and thus a political accomplishment’ (p. 158). For Marcus (1995), ‘tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity’ can help us ‘examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space’ (p. 96).

6. According to Nayak and Kehily (2008), ‘global ethnographies’ have the potential to facilitate new understandings of the ‘interconnections between the local and the global, and the ways in which diasporas, migrations and cultural ‘flows’ permeate’ the everyday lived experiences of youth in late modernity, as well as illuminate how young people are negotiating these global transformations in and across local spaces (p. 31). Also see Canniford (2005) for an interesting discussion of the possibilities (and problems) associated with doing ethnography in the ‘touristic global surfing subculture’ (p. 214). For Canniford (2005), moving through a ‘multi-vocal, iterative, non-linear process’ allowed him to select surfing ‘voices from both global and local discourses’, and ultimately gain a better understanding of surfing as a fluid and ‘complex culture to be found between and within other complex cultures’ (p. 214).

7. Of course, the covert nature of some aspects of these participant-observation phases raises many ethical issues. As Sands (2008) explains, ‘when or if the ethnographer reveals his/her role as a fieldworker and informs those being observed of the intent of the ethnographer is a matter of ethical concern’ (p. 369). While all participants have the right to know when their behaviour is being observed for research purposes, in some situations it was not feasible (or, indeed, safe) to declare my researcher identity or ask for informed consent from all participants. For example, while making observations from the chairlift of unidentifiable snowboarders and skiers interacting in the terrain park below; or at a Big Air snowboarding event with thousands of young, intoxicated spectators; or while overhearing a conversation between travelling snowboarders on a bus from the airport to a ski resort destination. Rather, I negotiated my way through the various social situations differently depending on the dynamics of the interaction and my role in the relations. In so doing, I regularly engaged in ‘situated ethics’; that is, I made ethical decisions regarding the overt and covert nature of my research based on the dynamics and complexities of the particular social, cultural and/or physical environment (Simons and Usher 2000, Wheaton 2002).

8. While much of this fieldwork was self-funded (and thus conducted on a shoe-string budget), I am very grateful for the financial assistance provided by a New Zealand Postgraduate Study Abroad Award (2005), two University of Waikato Research Grants (2007, 2010), and a Leverhulme Fellowship (2010), as well as the generous hospitality of some of my former snowboarding colleagues.

9. As Knowles (1999) explains, ‘fieldwork offers the transnational researcher the prospect of connection with a former life or the prospect of escape; it sustains the possibility of an alternate sense of belonging and self, deftly busied in conceptions of work and intellectual enterprise’ (p. 60). While I certainly enjoyed moments of escapism, nostalgia, adrenaline and joy during my fieldwork, the practice of global ethnography should not be romanticized. Transnational ethnography has the potential to be ‘humiliating, belittling, at times dull, boring and downright exhausting’ (Silk 2005, p. 75), as well as dangerous. When conducting global (and local) fieldwork the researcher – particularly the female researcher – should be prepared for an array of potentially high-risk or threatening situations in which instantaneous decisions may need to be made (such as witnessing violent, sexist and/or criminal behaviors; hiking out of bounds of a ski resort despite avalanche warnings). In such situations, researchers need to protect both the rights of their participants (anonymity) and their own safety. When confronted with situations requiring an almost immediate ethical response, the researcher should draw upon all of their senses to interpret the dynamics and complexities of the particular social, cultural and physical environment.

10. The majority of snowboarders are white and from the middle and upper classes. According to a recent study conducted by the United States National Sporting Goods Association, 89% of snowboarders are white; only 11% of American snowboarders are members of racial/ethnic minority groups; 3.6% Asian, 2.3% Hispanic/Spanish/Latino, 1.6% African American, 1.1% Native American, and 2.4% other (NGSA 2001). A study reported in Transworld Snowboarding also stated that in 2005, 44. 3% of American snowboarders had a household income of US$75,000 a year or more, which was considerably higher than the national average of US$50,200 the same year (Hard Numbers 2005, p. 58).
11. For example, in 2009, Ski New Zealand tourism agency offered Australian snow-sport enthusiasts an array of all-inclusive packages ranging from ‘luxury holidays’ to ‘backpacker specials’ (five nights accommodation in a multi-share room in a hostel in Queenstown, four day lift pass, and rental equipment for NZ$595). Indeed, during the three peak months of the 2009 winter season (June, July and August), Queenstown hosted more than 250,000 Australian visitors (Stats Confirm 2009, para 4). Similarly, British snowboarders can choose from a variety of all-inclusive packages to resorts across Europe (for example Andorra, Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Italy, and Switzerland). For example, during the winter season of 2008–2009 a three-day trip to Courcheval, France, including flights, lift passes, chalet board, rental, flights and three days’ packed lunch cost just £465. Attracting 37.5% of the 1.22 million British ski and snowboard holidaymakers, the French Alps continue to be the most popular destination for British snow-sport tourists (UK Ski Market, 2008).

12. Indeed, lift-pass prices at some resorts have skyrocketed in recent years. During the 2009 winter season, one-day lift passes at Treble Cone (Wanaka, New Zealand) and Vail (Colorado, USA) cost NZ$99.00 and US$97.00, respectively. During the same year, five helicopter-accessed runs in the Southern Alps (New Zealand) cost NZ$1245.00 per person, and a week of helicopter-accessed snowboarding in Valdez (Alaska) costs US$7640 per person, including accommodation and food. An even more exclusive week-long ‘private package’ for eight snow-sport enthusiasts in Valdez costs over US$67,000!

13. See Spowart, Hughson and Shaw (2008), however, for an interesting discussion of the creative strategies employed by committed snowboarders, particularly women, in an effort to continue participation after having children.

14. In light of government concerns about US unemployment, the law was amended in 2008 such that only 66,000 visas would be available to ‘alien’ workers per year. Visas are spread out over 12 months and exclude from the cap workers who were employed in the US during the previous three years. Prior to this law, the ski industry accounted for approximately one third of all H-2B visas issued each year (H2B Visa Information 2009).

15. For example, Nadja and Johanna, two young female snow-sport enthusiasts from Switzerland and Sweden, respectively, developed NAJO, a hand-made beanie company, to support their snowboarding lifestyle. During an interview in a small cafe in Zermatt (a Swiss town located at the base of the Matterhorn), Nadja and Johanna waxed lyrical about their transnational lifestyle, which consists of spending their winters skiing, snowboarding and making beanies, and their summers travelling across Europe surfing, climbing and selling their headwear. In their own words: ‘We have knitted our beanies in the Philippines, Thailand, Spain, France, Sweden, Norway, China, and Central America... We love our lives. We really love it, just travelling and following the lifestyle, and we don’t see our summer road-trips to the coast of Europe and winters in the Alps coming to an end any time soon’ (Nadja); ‘Everyone always asks me, when are you going to get a “real job”? But I just love my life right now. I read a lot and try to keep track of what’s happening in the world. I like learning and knowing, and might go to university one day. But I would miss the skiing, surfing and partying. I guess the “real job” can come later’ (personal communication, December 2007). Johanna and Nadja’s entrepreneurialism and commitment to the snowboarding lifestyle, however, should not be dismissed as a frivolous ‘time out’ before ‘going to university’ or getting ‘a real job’. In establishing and developing their company, they are learning many salient lessons about building a successful transnational business (such as website design, marketing and advertising, product sales and delivery, communication, product design, business ethics).

16. For example, later in her career Pamela organized inclusive, supportive, inter-cultural snowboard camps and clinics in New Zealand and Canada; upon returning to New Zealand, Adam enrolled in a Te Reo Māori language course in an effort to enhance his cultural sensitivity and understanding; and some travelling snowboarders and action sport enthusiasts are so deeply moved by their experiences that they found alternative sport-related social justice and humanitarian organizations. For example, Jeremy Jones, professional US snowboarder and founder of Protect Our Winters – a non-profit organization dedicated to educating and activating snow-sport participants on issues relating to global warming – describes his initial motivation as stemming from his personal observations of the effects of global warming on mountains, and in mountain communities, around the world: ‘It’s shocking to look through some of my own photos taken over the last two decades from snowfields all over the world, and to see the clear recession of these glaciated regions’ (Jeremy Jones 2007, para. 4); ‘Hiking up a grassy ski hill in Northern BC, a local skier is explaining
to me how he had grown up skiing on this very hill as a kid. Unfortunately, due to rising snow levels, the town was forced to close the mountain. The local was only 30 years old, so if he has seen such a drastic change in the last 30 years, then what was in store for the next 30? It [was] experiences like this that motivated me to start Protect Our Winters’ (About POW, no date, para. 1; also see Thorpe 2011, Thorpe and Rinehart 2010).

17. While most snowboard migrants retire from the ‘back-to-back’ lifestyle in their late twenties and early thirties, a few continue to pursue the transnational lifestyle well beyond their thirties. Others pursue careers (such as snowboard instructor in the winter, kayak instructor in the summer) or businesses (snowboard shop, local café owner) within local, regional or national contexts, which allow them to enjoy more permanent residences without sacrificing their participation in the sport and industry.

18. I am grateful to Professor John Urry and those in attendance at the ‘Space, mobility and place’ session during the 2010 British Sociological Association conference for their insightful comments here.

19. Importantly, these destinations also tend to be privileged places of play, pleasure and performance (Frohlick 2003, Sheller and Urry 2004). Compared to the population averages of their respective countries, the resident populations of Whistler, Chamonix and Queenstown are more highly educated, white, young, male, with higher household incomes. The majority of those travelling to, and temporarily residing in, these transnational physical cultural spaces also come from positions of social privilege.

References


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