

Tourism Geographies, 2015

LITERATURE REVIEWS

A cosmopolitan journey? Difference, distinction and identity work in gap year travel, by Helene Snee, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2014, 230 pp., £60 (hardback), ISBN 9781409453031

Helene Snee's book 'Cosmopolitan Journey? Difference, Distinction and Identity Work in Gap Year Travel,' emerged out of a 2010 PhD at the University of Manchester. Snee explores whether 'gap year' travel is potentially a way for a young person to become 'cosmopolitan'; and asks critical questions about that acquisition. While the intersection of tourism with cosmopolitanism has been explored over the past decade by Margaret Byrne Swain and others, this book suggests a more in-depth analysis about that intersection. However, the 'gapper' presented in the book only applies to British 'young people' who have finished their A Levels (the secondary school leaving qualification) and are traveling abroad before progressing onto university. It is a quite narrow interpretation, since the concept has expanded to include those who undertake breaks during or part of university education, post university, or during employment. Therefore, many gappers who take time out in the context of a longer career trajectory are not included.

The book is broken into eight chapters. In Chapter 1, the 'Introduction,' Snee seeks to quantify the number of UK gappers who meet her criteria and very broadly links gap year travel to the Grand Tours, the Hippy Trail, and volunteering overseas. However, one might argue for greater detail on how the gap year was developed by charities before umbrella organizations such as gapyear.com (UK), along with governmental, media, societal support (universities, schools, employers) developed more structured programs. In Chapter 2, 'Cultural cosmopolitanism and gap year debates,' the author reviews the debates surrounding cosmopolitanism and the implications for overseas gap years.

In Chapter 3, 'Theorizing good taste and worthwhile experiences in gap year travel,' the author demonstrates how a gap year is a means of accumulating 'cosmopolitan cultural capital' and constructing a cosmopolitan identity. Snee argues that the gap year is now institutionalized and legitimate; providing potential advantage in terms of increased employability. Chapter 4, 'Researching gap year narratives,' includes an assessment of the difficulties of using blog analysis, given that the 'gapper' label is an external, rather than internal means of identification. A final sample of 39 full and partial blogs authored by 17–19 year olds was gathered, which included 6 bloggers who undertook structured placements only, 21 who took placement and traveled, and 12 who traveled only. Nine of the bloggers were interviewed; with only one interviewee taking a fully unstructured gap year. While the blog hosts are provided (six were surprisingly hosted on myspace.com), the actual web site addresses are not provided in the appendix. Other blogger information would have been useful (length of gap year, educational background, funding means, name of placement company).

In Chapter 5, 'Encountering difference: gap year narratives of people and places,' the blogs reveal how people and places were framed as different by the bloggers. In Chapter 6, 'A traveler not a tourist: the value of cosmopolitan experiences,' the blogs revealed narratives of taste, with gap year stories of 'authentic' experiences and a cosmopolitan attitude analyzed with reference to the concept of 'cosmopolitan cultural capital' and status distinction. In Chapter 7, 'Gap year identity work,' Snee argues that gappers tend to

uncritically reproduce accepted discourses regarding the benefits of taking an overseas gap year. In what may be the main argument in the book, Snee argues is what distinguishes gap years from other forms of travel is the notion that their placements and travel need to be ‘worthwhile.’ The concluding chapter summarizes the key findings, with Snee detailing the gap year’s somewhat ineffective links to cosmopolitanism. Snee demonstrates how it contributes to the reproduction of structural disadvantage given the influence of class in determining what has cultural value and what sort of identity work is worthwhile.

This book is not an exploration of how a travel style has become legitimized, organized, and institutionalized by institutions and the state; it is symbolic power legitimized from the ability of universities, employers, charities, and government departments to structure this form of travel and sell it as a means to accumulate ‘experiences,’ ‘business skills,’ and ‘distinction.’ We do find out that this particular travel style would not weaken the temporal reliability of a life biography or undermine notions of temporal continuity as far as university prospects are concerned. However, because of the limitations of blog analysis in comparison to traditional field research or even Twitter analysis, we know little of the bloggers and their lives before or after their overseas travel blog entries started or ended. Maybe more may have been done with blog pictures or other cosmopolitan indicators such as food and music consumption. While one wonders about the gappers’ social position (income, wealth, education, and family culture), Snee does effectively demonstrate how accumulated capital can be converted back to linguistic, academic, economic, scholastic, and university capital that reproduce structures of power.

The narrow focus on a limited section of gappers who take time out abroad means many aspects of the modern gap year are unexplored. From British organizations offering free or subsidized gap years for Jewish students to Israel, to the British government offering gap years in their armed forces and providing gap years to graduates who would not ‘normally’ afford it, the institutions and policies that seek to structure institutionalized or credentialed capital through structured programs would be an interesting direction for future search. A discussion on whether cosmopolitan ethics (environmentalism, human rights) developed in the narratives would also have been more interesting than a focus on the commodification of Otherness. Further research might explore whether the conjunctural term ‘cosmopolitanism cultural capital’ used in this book is solely part of a traveling global elite, or it is a resource which might be invested through UK based gap years. Deriving many insights and perspectives from its interpretation of the intersection of overseas gap year travel by British school leavers heading to university and cosmopolitanism, this book will of interest to tourism studies students and academics. However, notwithstanding the book’s timely and focused contribution, one might argue that that the gap year phenomenon and the intersection of travel and cosmopolitanism remains underexplored.

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