

**Book Review: A Cosmopolitan Journey? Difference, Distinction and Identity Work in Gap Year Travel. Helene Snee, . Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. ISBN: 9781409453031**

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## A Cosmopolitan Journey? Difference, Distinction and Identity Work in Gap Year Travel

Helene Snee

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There is a growing critical literature on the sociology of youth volunteering. Authors are increasingly finding ways to demonstrate how the symbolic power of charity can be used and abused, and how young people are frequently required by structural forces to build their identities and biographies - and CVs - through undertaking a variety of voluntary labours alongside leisure pursuits to present themselves to universities and prospective employers in certain ways. These presentations are of 'good', rounded citizens, with a range of experiences, giving them a 'competitive edge' in the context of credentialism. In that vein, Helene Snee's recent book *A Cosmopolitan Journey?* investigates how young British people experience both altruistic and leisure-centred gap years. She demonstrates how rather than the common narratives of 'broadening the mind', and 'finding yourself' while doing something worthwhile, gap years can reproduce dominant discourses around difference, and can reinforce existing inequalities as vehicles to demonstrate 'mobility capital'.

Snee utilises a qualitative methodology, studying and analysing data from 39 blogs written by young people aged 17-19 during the course of their gap years. In addition, of these bloggers nine participated in a follow-up semi-structured interview, which allowed for some comparison of the different ways of framing issues, and for extra information to be explored. For anyone interested in blog analysis, Snee's book contains an incredibly detailed methods chapter where the difficulties of this form of analysis are discussed, focusing on issues of data quality, authorship, and the vagaries of a public medium where the blogger is both writing for and interacting with a certain audience, a performance for those back home.

Snee addresses very early in the book the privilege of the young people she is studying here: all have finished their A-levels and are progressing to university. All have the financial support to undertake the gap year they have chosen, and are living up to the figure of the gap year student enshrined in popular culture, which Snee recognises. One critical comment would be that what's missing from the book is the voice of those affected by the 'gappers'. In a rich and varied chapter on 'encountering difference', it's stressed that the reality of gap years is as a way to 'gain status' back home, rather than reflexively engage with different cultures. We read blog excerpts of those on gap years eating exotic foods, sometimes verbalising a form of post-colonial superiority. From the bloggers comes some occasional expression of a desire to understand host communities, but also some unreflexive complaint that ideal scenery has become sullied by tourists and travellers. Without the voices of those communities, through blogs or interviews, responding to the gappers, the reader may be left feeling they've only got part of the story.

Yet this should not diminish the fact that this is an important and timely book. It's an enjoyable and clearly written text that engages extensively both with a wide range of theory but also with a novel data set. The qualitative data is presented in a lively and expressive way. Young people face an

enormous range of pressures at this time of their life. Despite their comparative privilege, these young people face another pressure, to both have 'the time of their lives', and to make it look to their friends and family back home that they are having the time of their lives. Snee is right to examine gap years as unproblematic 'good things', with one reading viewing them as just another mechanism of competition, to develop the right cosmopolitan dispositions and the right tastes, which are increasingly invaluable in a globalised employment context.

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