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Framing the Other: cosmopolitanism and the representation of difference in overseas gap year narratives[1]

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Abstract

This paper engages with debates surrounding contemporary cosmopolitanism and the outcomes of cultural encounters. It considers if overseas gap years, often put forward in the UK as a way of becoming a global citizen, enable young Britons to 'broaden their mind'. I explore representations of the people and places encountered during these periods of time out through an analysis of young people's travel blogs. Four key themes are highlighted in these narratives: the exotic place; feeling 'out of place'; the importance and outcomes of local interaction; and the historical legacies that are implicated in constructing places as 'different'. Gappers display a willingness to interact with and gain knowledge about their host communities. Yet as gap years are designed to be distinct from the normal course of things, they also demonstrate the 'difference' of places. This can often result in the reproduction of established ways of representing the Other in order to frame them as meaningful. There is a tension in the narratives between 'globally reflexive' and 'globally reproductive' representations of difference, and I suggest that we might question the development of cosmopolitan attitudes and competencies through undertaking a gap year.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism; gap year; blogs; framing; representation

Introduction

> Without a certain kind of space, a certain kind of story is simply impossible (Moretti 1998, cited in Back 2007: 51).

Cosmopolitanism is a particular stance towards difference, 'an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other' (Hannerz 1990: 239). Questions surround how this orientation might be achieved: does contact with other cultures necessarily result in cosmopolitan attitudes? Engagement with the Other

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might involve the 'true' form as described by Hannerz above, be simply aesthetic or even banal (Woodward, Skrbis and Bean 2008). Whether cultural encounters and their outcomes can be considered as cosmopolitan is significant for notions of global political community, and debates concerning 'cultural difference, democratic negotiation and conflict resolution' (Delanty 2011: 642).

This paper enters into these debates through exploring the representations of difference presented in 'gap year' narratives. Jones defines a gap year as: 'any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual "takes out" of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time sits in the context of a longer career trajectory' (Jones 2004: 8). This identifies a key characteristic of gap years: they are a break from the normal course of things, yet are not a complete rupture from what comes before and after. Taking 'time out' in this way is a liminal period (Turner 1974), marking a transition from one stage of life to the next. I focus on a particular form of gap year: spending time overseas between school and university in the form of independent travel and/or an organized placement. The UK government's Directgov website notes that gap years can be used to volunteer abroad, gain skills through work experience, or 'see a bit of the world' (Directgov 2009: n.p.). This final point highlights the benefits of taking a gap year overseas. Through travel, gappers are not only able to 'boost their employability' and 'learn new skills', but also 'explore new cultures' and 'become global citizens' (Raleigh 2009: n.p.). Such accounts thus see gap years as a way of becoming more cosmopolitan. However, whether this development of 'global citizenship' occurs has been subject to some debate, particularly with reference to volunteer tourism in less developed countries (Lyons et al. 2012; Simpson 2004, 2005a, 2005b).

I focus on the narratives of young people from the UK who embark on overseas gap years. Volunteering, working or travelling overseas during transitional periods is not a uniquely British phenomenon. However, gap years have become a recognized, identifiable social practice in the UK: they are encouraged by the education sector and government, and are marketed by an expanding gap year industry. The institutionalization of the gap year has resulted in its emergence as a 'bound and recognisable product' (Simpson 2005a: 143). This article explores descriptions of people and places in the online travel 'blogs' of young people from the UK with a range of overseas gap year experiences. It begins with a review of gap years as a means of self-development, and cosmopolitanism as a 'reflexive' orientation. The article then outlines the project's methodology and the sorts of claims that can be made using blog data. I review four key themes in the gappers' representations: defining exotic places; feeling 'out of place'; the importance and outcomes of local interaction; and the historical legacies that are implicated in constructing places as 'different'. I argue that the young people's framing of experience

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negotiates a tension between globally reproductive, which depicts the Other as exotic and authentic, to globally reflexive, which reflects more critically upon places. I also suggest that the cosmopolitan tendency amongst the gappers is mainly self-referential (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005: 206), as it is framed by the discourses of 'home', rather than a critical engagement with difference when 'away'. In turn, we can question the claims for developing cosmopolitan attitudes through the gap year experience.

Gap year places, self-development, and cosmopolitanism

Research into gap years suggests they are a way of accumulating cultural capital[2] and increasing one's 'employability' (Cremin 2007; Heath 2007). Some authors also argue gap years involve significant identity work at transitional moments, like those between school and university (Ansell 2008; Bagnoli 2009; King 2009). Anthropological accounts of tourism as a ritual practice note the similarities with 'rites of passage' involving progression from one social status to another (Graburn 1983: 12). The period of liminality or 'apartness' (Turner 1974) that characterizes such rites has some relevance for understanding the gap year.[3] Liminal behaviour involves reversals or inversions from the norm (such as home vs elsewhere, or affluence vs simplicity) (Graburn 1983: 19). In the gap year narratives that follow, the concern with such inversions marks the period as distinct from home,[4] yet draws on it for a point of comparison.

Why is taking a gap year overseas seen to be beneficial? Travel is often associated with its capacity to 'broaden the mind', such as the educational Grand Tours of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for Western Europe's noble youth (Craik 1997). Rather than visiting the sites of consecrated culture, the value of the contemporary gap year is associated with exposure to difference, which may be required to be culturally competent in an increasingly globalized world. Johan (2009), for example, argues that overseas gap years enable young people to engage with different cultural contexts and learn through new experiences and interactions with 'the Other'. Volunteering in particular, when combined with travel, is seen to facilitate understanding of different cultures and the issues facing communities through this cross-cultural interaction (Raymond and Hall 2008: 531). Yet the idea that volunteering in any context is automatically a 'good thing' is a normative assumption, rather a critical reflection on the enabled learning for both volunteers and the communities they engage with (Holdsworth and Quinn 2012).[5]

The outcomes of overseas gap years have been subject to some debate. Simpson's work (2004, 2005a, 2005b) on gap year placements argues that the industry does not engage with transnational inequalities of power and wealth. Reviewing the literature, Lyons et al. suggest that the prospects for changing gappers' world views through volunteering are hindered by a 'neoliberal ethos'

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that pervades gap year placements. This entails a focus on skills development; the privilege processes of elitism and 'Othering'; and the commodification of such experiences (Lyons et al. 2012). A less critical account of gap year volunteering from Jones (2005) sees placements as able to generate some understanding of global issues and inequalities, depending on the quality of the provider. Overseas gap years do not necessarily involve volunteering, and periods of independent travel may also be concerned with developing similar understandings. Studies of young travellers document their desires to go beyond tourism and have authentic experiences of the places they visit (Desforges 1998; O'Reilly 2006). Such work draws MacCannell's (1999) argument that being 'inside' a place is an important element of authenticity. Being open to the Other is a way of making distinctions through the prioritizing of 'real' experiences and is a sign of good taste in travel. However, this desire can involve a distortion of the Other, such as romanticized exoticism (Wang 2000: 140–1).

Being or becoming cosmopolitan is a practice, but it also works at another analytical level: as a moral ideal (Nowicka and Rovisco 2009: 2). Ideas of cultural tolerance, understanding and openness are grounded in morality, which intersect with the discourses of volunteering as altruism, or gaining access to 'real' local cultures. So do gap years contribute to the development of a cosmopolitan attitude, a '*conscious* attempt to be familiar with people, objects and places that sit outside one's local or national settings' (Skrbis and Woodward 2007: 732; my emphasis)? We might increasingly come into contact with diversity through globalizing processes so that it is unremarkable or goes unnoticed, without developing the corresponding cosmopolitan ethical orientations.[6] Hannerz argues that 'genuine' cosmopolitanism is not just about desire for the Other, but the engagement with a 'culture of critical discourse' that he contrasts with tacit or common sense knowledge (1990: 246–7). This involves what Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst (2005) term 'global reflexivity' in their study of belonging in the UK, referring to the capacity to look at one's 'place in the world' without the default use of local references. For young British people overseas, this would mean that they 'look at their lives, thoughts and values from a perspective that did not take [British] referents as the explicit frame for judgement, but which was able to place them in some kind of broader comparative frame' (Savage et al 2005: 191). Understanding of cultural encounters are reflected upon and placed in a global context. The degree of reflexivity in the gappers' accounts in the form of critical reflection on their encounters with difference thus provides a means of interrogating the contribution of gap years to intercultural understanding.

We can locate these questions within wider sociological debates regarding reflexivity and self-development. The idea that such encounters may contribute to identity work could be seen as an example of Giddens's 'cosmopolitan person':

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> A person may make use of diversity in order to create a distinctive self-identity which positively incorporates elements from different settings into an integrated narrative. Thus a cosmopolitan person is one precisely who draws strength from being at home in a variety of contexts (Giddens 1991: 190).

According to Giddens (1991), this enables individuals to negotiate the fragmentation of collective identities like class in late modernity. This is a reflexive process, which, in this context, refers to 'the ability [of agents] to reflect upon the social conditions of their existence and change them accordingly' (Beck 1994: 174). Places form an important part of this narrative as they are seen to 'contain' experiences that can be incorporated into one's identity (Desforges 1998: 175). These places are not simply 'out there', waiting to be consumed, however. Telling stories about gap year locations brings a particular sort of place, and the people that inhabit it, into being.

Alternatively, are the gappers' encounters with place indicators of a more habitual way of thinking? This second position draws upon the work of Bourdieu and his concept of habitus, embodied dispositions that are the outcome of being embedded in a particular social context. We are already pre-adapted to appropriate ways of being and doing through our internalization of our social circumstances (Bourdieu 1990: 56). These dispositions are structured, in the sense that they are determined by one's conditions of existence, but they are also structuring, in the sense that the habitus 'organises practices and the perception of practices' (Bourdieu 1984: 170). This would suggest that previous experience guides the ways the gappers understand and encounter the places they visit, and in turn reproduce these pre-conceptions. Moreover, if gap year travel is a means of accumulating cultural capital, then it will be implicated in cultural distinction (Bourdieu 1984). Hage (2000), for example, argues that 'cosmopolitan capital' is a subset of cultural capital, used by the middle classes to distance themselves from those who lack this good taste through the consumption of 'ethnic difference'. In a study of the attitudes of parents whose children who attend internationalized schools, Weenink (2008) employs the term cosmopolitan cultural capital to note how school choice is driven by perceptions of the upward social mobility to be achieved in globalizing social arenas.

The moralized claims made about gap years neglect the structural factors that are bound up with the practice, be it the continuing relevance of global inequality and power in understanding gap year travel (Simpson 2004, 2005a, 2005b), or inequalities of access to gap year experiences, the accumulation of cultural capital and the associated hierarchies of status and taste (Heath 2007). Through exploring the ways that gap year narratives are framed, this paper offers a critique of such claims by problematizing the automatic assumption of developing intercultural understanding. Instead, the spontaneous narratives

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offered in gappers' travel blogs indicate that habitual frames tend to be employed when encountering difference.

Method

The framing of gap year places was explored through a qualitative analysis of 39 travel blogs, using a sample drawn from a search for the phrase 'gap year' on blog search engines and host platforms. Nine of the bloggers were also interviewed, although this paper focuses on the blog data. A blog was included in the sample if its author was from the UK and taking their gap year between school and university, with some time spent overseas. The gappers were all between seventeen and nineteen when they started their gap year (sample described in Table I below). The data were then read and coded guided by the principles of what Kelle terms 'qualitative induction', in which specific phenomenon are described with reference to existing categories; and 'abductive inference', in which data presents new and atypical events (Kelle 1997). Quotations from the blogs are presented using pseudonyms, and reproduced verbatim (including spelling and typographical errors).

Blogs provide naturalistic and spontaneous accounts of experience; what is important for the gapper themselves to communicate. Blog analysis is therefore a means of capturing certain narratives that are 'not "contaminated" by the predating interest of a researcher' (Hookway 2008: 96). Most of the blogs sampled were set up especially to record this experience. The interviewees stated that blogging was more convenient than group emails, and also provided them with a record of their travels. Likely readers were seen to be friends and family 'back home'. In the blogs there was an acknowledgment that the reader could be unknown, e.g.: 'For the random readers who don't know me' (Ewan). The accounts that are drawn upon in this study thus are a public presentation of gap year experiences. This is a particular version of events, but one that still provides an important insight into the framing of encounters with difference. Scholars interested in cosmopolitanism and independent travel have suggested the use of blogs or online travel journals as a way of exploring representations of such experiences (Germann Molz 2006, 2007), or studying 'touristic spaces' that deconstruct and reconstruct 'home' and 'away', and the relationship between them (Enoch and Grossman 2010: 521).

Table I: *Blog sample*

	Placement only	Both placement and travel	Independent travel only	Total
Male	2	9	7	18
Female	4	12	5	21
Total	6	21	12	39

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One of the key limitations of blogs is that it is not possible to verify the identity of the gappers, nor connect their narratives with particular backgrounds. The content of the blogs meant that gender and age could be identified, but not confirmed. Similarly, we might question whether the gappers were telling the truth about their experiences. Such concerns are mediated by considering the sorts of claims this paper is aiming to make, as I do not attempt to make any conclusions about the structural position of the participants in relation to their gap year narratives. A further limitation is that the study excludes gappers who do not write blogs, and thus those who might have a different take on the gap year experience. Any conclusions about the wider gap year population are therefore limited. What the blogs offer is an indication of how young people tell stories about the gap year, and the frames that they draw upon in order to do this. The merit of blog analysis is the ability to engage with descriptions of encountering difference, rather than make claims about any offline 'truth'.[7]

Ethical decision-making in online spaces has to be contextually dependent: in this case, negotiating the distinction between public and private, and between subject and author.[8] The research is not specifically concerned with the participants as 'subjects': it is their representations of experiences that are the objects of study. There is a strong case for considering this data in the public domain, as it is not only publicly accessible but potentially written for an audience. Informed consent was therefore not required to analyse the gap year blogs of those who were not interviewed (the subset of bloggers who *were* interviewed gave informed consent for the use of their blog data). However, as noted by Hookway, the choice for researchers who use blogs as primary data is whether to preserve the anonymity of participants or credit bloggers for their work (Hookway 2008: 106). There were certain personal details provided on the gappers' blogs, and although they chose to make this available, citing the blog posts would put me in the predicament of revealing their identities. Hence, URLs or 'links' to the gap year websites are not provided, and personal details have been removed. This study therefore adopts 'moderate disguise' as suggested by Bruckman (2002), in which verbatim quotations are used but names, pseudonyms and identifiable details changed.

The data were approached in the analysis using Goffman's concept of frames: 'definitions of a situation [that] are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events . . . and our subjective involvement in them' (Goffman 1974: 10–1). These are engaged to locate, perceive, identify and label events, and are how we make them meaningful and are able to communicate them to others. Delanty (2011) has recently argued that investigations of cosmopolitanism should not just focus on social actors and their dispositions; we need to consider cultural encounters. Blogs provide a way of accessing the outcomes of such encounters at a micro level. The approach employed in the analysis recognized the dimensions of culture that

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are cognitive (how the gappers make sense of world) and relational (accounts of the gappers' relations with others, communicated to others) (Delanty 2011: 642). Did the gappers critically reflect on the frames used to tell their gap year stories, or did they utilize well established ways to frame difference?

The exotic gap year place

In describing the places encountered, the gappers draw on popular representations of the exotic, particularly media images. They utilize *established cultural frames* to refer the reader to an imagined, idyllic location. A common example is 'the perfect beach', signified by blue-green sea, white sand and palm trees. Beaches are shorthand for an ideal tropical paradise:

> It was nice being down there when it wasn't busy, the beach is really nice and just like the ones you see in films. White sand, blue seas, clear skies and palm trees and all that, very nice :) (Bryn).

> We sailed to White Haven Beach which is just like on the postcards, really pretty; white sands and light blue sea (Jo).

Another blogger, Adam, writes that a place in Brazil reminds him of the film and novel *The Beach*. Although *The Beach* was set (and filmed) in Thailand, he can use this to recall a wider frame of an exotic, idyllic location that is ready to be explored.

Such imaginings distinguish between home – the normal routine – and away – the gap year in the exotic place. In doing so, experiences are framed as distinctive. According to Urry (2002), tourists read the landscape to see signs, acquired from travel discourses, of pre-established notions of places in order to compare them with the everyday and draw pleasure from being somewhere out of the ordinary (Urry 2002: 12–13). Again, the concept of framing is useful here, as this suggests that destinations are approached with certain 'schemata of interpretation' (Goffman 1974: 21) to render them meaningful. For example, Paul discusses how he realized he had left the 'western' world behind when he landed in Uganda, drawing a distinct line between his normal environment and this exotic place. Reflecting upon his pre-conceptions of 'Africa', he wondered if there would:

> . . . be mud-huts everywhere or would all the towns and cities feel just [like] western ones? Seeing orange roads criss-crossing hinted at the former but really I knew it would be somewhere in-between (Paul).

Such comments were typical of a tension that existed in encountering places in the gappers' accounts. Paul's reflections challenge but also reinforce images of 'Africa' in the popular imagination by referring to mud huts and dusty roads.

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Encounters with the exotic are often articulated via the consumption of food, and it is quite common for the gappers to describe what they are eating. Francesca, who has been teaching in Russia during her gap year, recounts how her Russian housemate teases her when it is revealed she had unwittingly eaten horsemeat. She is careful to mention, however, that it is 'extraordinarily delicious' and 'tasty'. Francesca is not only encountering the exotic, she is able to show that she is doing so successfully. Other bloggers discuss the available goods on local food stalls as sources of spectacle and entertainment. For example, Owen's discussion of the insects on sale at a Thai market stresses the 'Otherness' of this gap year place:

> It was here that i picked up a 'variety bag' of deep fried . . . all sorts. These ranged from Scorpions . . . to cockroaches and locusts. Sadly (i think) any flavour that may have survived the intensive frying process was masked by the soy sauce and chilly [chilli] powder but none the less it was a good laugh (Owen).

As noted by Duruz, food is central to 'the western cosmopolitan's search for "novel" tastes – for consuming difference literally, alimentarily' (2004: 248). The consumption of the exotic in this way contributes to a narrative of 'the adventurous traveller'. Food is part of the performance of a cosmopolitan identity for the round the world travellers in Germann Molz's (2007) study of online travel narratives. However, these embodied performances of openness and consumption of difference frame White/middle class/First World as the norm, with the Other as exotic and strange (Germann Molz 2007). In establishing a location that is away, the gappers present narratives that centre on coming into contact with something Other. The frames that they employ are bound up with recognized ideas about what is exotic: the picture perfect beach, a non-Western way of life, bizarre food. The subjective experience of being somewhere 'exotic', however, is feeling out of place in certain contexts.

Feeling out of place

Feeling out of place manifests in a tension in the gappers' accounts between demonstrations of insider knowledge and preconceptions of difference. A further extract from Francesca's blog, written during a placement she undertakes in Mongolia, encapsulates this:

> Alongside a few Orthodox Chruches [sic] are also Buddhist temples, and of course the ethnic diversity is totally different – a good 40 per cent of the people if not more are ethnic Buryats or Mongolians. If I squint my eyes I really feel as if I'm in China (or what I think parts of China feel like anyway.) (Francesca).

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On one hand, there is a level of sophistication in the local knowledge presented, with details of the religious and ethnic make-up of the local region. On the other, there is a less thoughtful statement that she could be 'in China' – presumably because East Asian people look 'Chinese'.

Physical differences between the gappers and the local people they encounter engender feelings of 'standing out'. At times, the gappers are uncomfortable and feel they do not 'fit in' or are 'on display'. Ewan, for example, talks about being 'conspicious [conspicuous]' as he is heads above a 'sea of Thais', despite being on the Khao San Road in Bangkok, one of the most infamous backpacker destinations with a group of other 'Westerners'. Differences are racialized, including Dave's comment that his white skin makes him feel like 'the exhibit' at a museum in Tanzania. This is apparent even in 'Western' countries, such as when Hugo arrives in New York:

> We were slightly nervour [nervous] about travelling on teh [the] subway esp[ecially] later in the evening. However it wasnt too bad despite getting a few looks and for a whi;e [while] travelling in a carriage where we were the only white people out of 20 or so people (Hugo).

Skin colour is used as a signifier to define how he and his friend do not fit.

Alongside physical differences, the bloggers refer to standing out due to cultural factors, although these can be related to embodied knowledge and physical behaviour. Jason becomes embarrassed during his first meal in Hong Kong when he is brought a knife and fork without being asked. In this situation, it is not only the food that is exotic, but the whole cultural experience of dining. Jason is able to negotiate this by demonstrating his sophistication through the use of chopsticks. Another cultural misunderstanding occurs when Christina makes a faux pas in Uganda through her body language, and learns that standing with her arms crossed is rude. She encounters a number of cultural differences during her year-long teaching placement. However, she is able to negotiate potential embarrassments by gaining insider knowledge. While Jason draws upon established knowledge to frame how he deals with the situation in the restaurant, Christina puts forward a narrative of developing understanding. Avoiding this feeling of not fitting in (unlike 'looking different') can therefore be negotiated with the idea of being or becoming an experienced traveller.

An extract from Paul's blog encapsulates the unease of perceived difference:

> I could not help but feel out of place. I was still heavily culture shocked and I think the root of it was a great uncertainty of how the people around me would react. I knew that the Ugandan people I was surrounded by had a life very different to mine, what could I say to them? How would they react to my prescence [presence]? What if I do something to offend them? (Paul).

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A sense of comfort or discomfort felt in a place can be understood with reference to Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field. The embodied 'system of durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu 1990: 51) of the habitus provide individuals with a 'feel for the game' to guide appropriate action in a given social field[9]. If one's habitus does not fit with the game one is positioned in, however, this can generate bodily discomfort and unease (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005: 9). Bourdieu suggests that it is at these points that reflexivity can occur (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 131). While this theory is intended to be an account of practice within different arenas of social space rather than different geographical locations[10], its significance when considering the gappers' accounts is threefold. Firstly, feelings of being 'out of place' can be conceptualized as differences between dispositions to action and the most 'appropriate' action in a given situation, for example, Christina's unintentional rudeness through her bodily stance. Secondly, Bourdieu's model highlights how cultural knowledge is embodied and that a lack of it can be experienced corporally. Finally, if deliberation and even reflexivity may be a result of the disjunctures between habitus and field, we might speculate that 'not fitting in' may prompt the gappers to reflect on their place in the world.

However, such reflexive deliberations are not always evident in the bloggers' accounts. There is a tendency to use stereotypical representations and 'off-the-shelf' generalizations derived from popular culture. For example, typical reference points in Asia included: the presence of 'ladyboys' in Thailand and not being 'confused'; eating dogs in Korea; and mistranslations of English described as 'Engrish'. Stereotypical representations are not just limited to 'the East', so that the drinking habits of Australians are classified as 'typical', or an individual compared to *Crocodile Dundee*. Rapport (1995) argues that stereotypes enable migratory individuals who feel out of place to make sense of their contact with the Other. They are a useful 'frame' to deal with diversity because stereotypes contextualize both themselves and those they encounter. While Rapport notes that stereotypes are personalized by individuals, I suggest that collective framing that occurs at these moments, as it also enables the benefits of interaction with local people and places to be understood by those at home.

Interacting with local people and places

Huxley notes that engaging with local people during independent travel can be constrained by economic asymmetries; imbalanced roles and relationships; limited time spent in a place; and encountering other travellers (Huxley 2004: 40). The appeal of gap year placements is understandable as they enable young people to spend a period of time in one place and are aimed at some level of community integration. However, interacting with local people and places is still a concern for gappers travelling before, during or after a placement, or if

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they are solely backpacking during their time out. This interaction is important, as its perceived outcome is the ability to demonstrate an understanding of host community traditions, culture and history. In other words, it is seen to demonstrate *cosmopolitan* competences. As well as an orientation towards diversity, Hannerz suggests cosmopolitanism is also a 'competence . . . a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting' (Hannerz 1990: 239). In this sense, cosmopolitanism 'allow[s] one to make one's way within other cultures and countries' (Szerszynski and Urry 2006: 114). Competently interacting with local people and local contexts enable the negotiation of not 'fitting in', as discussed above. In turn, this shows cultural and historical understanding, and moves beyond touristic relationships. Such attempts are not always successful, however.

A tension between gaining an insight into the 'real life' of local people, and how these are framed, is evident in varying degrees throughout the gappers' accounts. One example is Anna's reflection upon local issues and inequalities in South Africa:

> Africa is amazing. The weather is fantastic, the culture is so different from home and the people are friendly. But only when you come here do you relaise [realise] that there is still so much to be done. Aparthied [Apartheid] is still very recent and I've even heard some people say it still exists. People are so passionate about politics and this country is just so alive and so dynamic. Things seem to be happening all the time. (Anna).

Anna's post provides a good example of the enthusiasm with which the gappers approach their host communities, but also the ways in which understandings of the local are somewhat restricted in their scope. She refers to the legacy of apartheid in South Africa and it impact on recent history. However, the way that she frames this discussion is with reference to a generic 'Africa'. It also exemplifies the value placed on being able to experience difference in situ. According to Anna, it is only being in 'Africa' that enables her to know what needs to be 'done'.

Some gappers display their level of sensitivity for local customs, such as correct behaviour in places of worship. The following extract is taken from a blog entry written by Harri's boyfriend, in which he describes their thoughts on the impact of tourism on 'Ayers Rock' (Uluru) in Australia and whether tourists should climb on the site:

> Me and [H] decided not to out of respect for the culture, but so many people did and that really bothered me how so many of us demand respect for our own cultures, yet arent prepared to give it to such a sacred place . . . its just its hard to enjoy it when you see what its done to the aboriginal culture that surrounds it (a lot of aboriginals havent adapted to this 'new' way of life at all, and have developed bad drinking problems among other things) (Harri).

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In linking the transformation of a 'sacred site' into a tourist destination with the results of colonialism on the indigenous population, Harri's boyfriend places these practices in context. The place that is invoked through such a discussion is one that was original or unspoilt, but has been contaminated by the presence of 'the West'. Such comments allow distinctions between culturally sensitive approaches to travel, and the practices of 'tourists'. 'Good taste' is demonstrated through cosmopolitan sensibilities.

The participants may explicitly state that they are not tourists and place themselves in opposition: 'An annoying British tourist just came into the post office' (Francesca). Tourist services and infrastructure are seen to be overpriced, and the best experiences can be found by avoiding 'tourist traps'. Naivety and inexperience are associated with being a tourist and linked to the embarrassment of not 'fitting in'. Duncan would rather get very lost in Ghana (which is what happens) than stand out:

> I emerged 10 minutes later from a strange, station-side market and appeared to be at a large, busy cross road. Afraid to look at the map section of the book, for fear of looking like a tourist . . . (Duncan).

Local interaction is generally viewed by the gappers as a positive experience: a privileged insight into a different place. This is particularly evident when the gappers discuss close relationships with their host communities, framed as going beyond touristic relationships. However, these interactions can also be negative, as certain events are difficult to bring into a story of successful meetings with the 'Other'. These are experiences of unease, fear or discomfort with 'a different kind of difference', one that is not alluringly exotic but hostile. Common complaints include 'hassle', such as being asked for money by local people; being 'ripped off'; or female gappers feeling threatened. Jenny, for example, discusses her discomfort with the 'intense' behaviour of local men in Guyana. The racialized elements of this harassment are clearly highlighted when Jenny discloses she and her friends are referred to as 'white meat'. This spoils the gappers' idealized version of a place. Adam, for instance, describes the hassle he receives in the Philippines as 'an unfortunate parasite on a would-be ideal destination'.

This tension between positive and negative experiences of interacting with the local, and how the gappers negotiate this, is exemplified in two extracts from Katy's blog from her time volunteering at a school in Nepal. The first is taken from a post as she was preparing to leave at the end of the placement:

> no one can begin to imagen [imagine] the warmth with which we've been greeted by everyone we've met. the children at the school all wrote us letters, drew pictures, sang songs, and wished up 'a sweet and safe journey'. the teachers i consider as genuine friends (Katy).

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Katy focuses on connecting with the community, moving beyond tourism, and emphasizes the value of the work she has been doing. Although her experiences lead her to think about the world and her contribution, life in Nepal is positioned as more authentic, with people in the UK missing out on 'simple things'. In contrast to this romantic view, the following extract is taken from halfway through Katy's time in Nepal:

> still loving nepal, but the hassleing and staring is starting to get to us. we've begun to shout at guys if they stare, and just shout ' hoina'[11] at any street trader who hassles us. think some of the westerners who have only just arroved [arrived] in ktm [Kathmandu] think were crazy, but you cant walk down the street without someone wanting your money. for a while its bearable and now its just too much (Katy).

Katy states how she can deal with hassle as an insider, unlike the 'Westerners' who have just arrived. The way that such insider knowledge is presented tends to frame gap year locations with references to poverty, tradition, disorder, and risk.

Historical legacies and discourses of risk

A common complaint about the global South in the blogs is that they are disorganized. Charlotte makes reference to chaos in her discussion of placement at a school in Thailand:

> Later walked past classrooms to find chaos and children everywhere but no teachers, went to find a one, all were in a meeting during the day about the inspection happening at that moment! Its so different from home and a constant reminder of the culture difference (Charlotte).

In drawing attention to the differences such as these, there is an implicit justification for volunteering schemes. The 'neediness' of less developed countries is not always questioned in gap year programmes, reproducing colonial discourses of disorder and unreliability in opposition to models of modern Western rationality (Simpson 2004: 686). Defining the 'Other' defines the self, so that gap year narratives are implicated in and built upon using 'away' as a reflection of 'home'. Wang has identified a paradox in travel narratives, as there is both nostalgia for a simpler and more authentic way of life but also self-confidence that home nations are 'superior' (Wang 2000: 138–9).

This paradoxical relationship with the 'Other' is at the heart of the ways in which the participants define their gap year places. There are the frustrations of 'hassle' and disorder, but the life of the 'Other' is more 'real'. For example, the gappers contrasted the intimacy of local cultures to the distance of the West, such as Libby's comment that the Maori greeting of touching noses is

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'really humbling' compared to the conventions of physical distance in the UK. Such encounters are framed with reference to an older, untouched 'way of life':

> [Friend] went back to basics and joined a hill tribe in the remotest parts of the north (he stayed with a tribal family for six days trying to get a real idea of the kind of lives these people live) (Adam).

The discourses that surface in the gappers' descriptions of hill tribes or other 'ethnic minorities' such as Maori are centred upon the idea of a humble, simple, basic Other. This suggests the endurance of the tropes of European expansion and colonization identified by O'Reilly in her discussion of independent travellers, such as the 'natural' native; 'traditional life'; and the simple 'happy native' (O'Reilly 2006: 1003). It may seem overly critical to refer to history of colonialism when discussing the travel narratives of enthusiastic young people on their gap year. However, if the claims that surround the gap year experience are to be believed, one might expect young people to move beyond some of these historical ideas about the 'Other'.

Gap year places are also framed as those of danger, intersecting with a narrative of risk and adventure. Alicia describes Rio de Janeiro as '. . . hot, unfamiliar and pretty scary'. Images of the exotic place surface in these frames, particularly in the context of diseases and dangerous animals:

> Geesh there's so many things to kill me in the jungle you'd think it weren't natural for us humans to live there! :O[12] I have to take loads of tablets (expensive!) and cover myself in insect repellent to prevent getting malaria. Great (Will).

Will makes these comments before he even sets off for his gap year in Central America. Such frames of danger and risk are a source of apprehension but also thrilling. Other dangers are linked to the discourses of 'disorganized cultures', and the perils of travel, or different standards of health and safety in less developed countries. The gappers are able to display 'insider knowledge' about these conditions and offer advice in their blogs. This allows Jessica and Celia to warn their readers: '. . . don't ever drive in delhi! No-one cares about lanes, other people, speed . . .' (Jessica and Celia). Playing with risk is positioned as both daring and as evidence of difference:

> I am pretty sure that Ecuadorian Health and Safety standards are no way as high as their English equivalents; we ended up climbing up ridiculously steep metal ladders which had hand rails each side and nothing else to stop you falling off/through the bottom of them to the crowded city below (Lucy).

Lucy simultaneously highlights the 'superiority' of Western safety and also the thrill of doing something risky. According to Elsrud, difference is required for risk and adventure in independent travel narratives. Images of

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Otherness – such as the 'savagery' or 'unreliability' of local people – gives places their symbolic value (Elsrud 2001: 606, 609). Representations of risky places thus provide kudos that differ from the 'safety' of tourism.

Difference is also experienced in developed countries. The following extract is from Lisa's blog, who works at a private boarding school in New York State, USA, during her gap year. Part of her placement includes volunteering with the school's charity schemes in the local area and New York City:

> After school today, it was my first time at [Community Project]. I was a bit nervous, I didn't know what to expect. [It] is an interesting sort of place. It's for boys aged 5–20 who have had to leave home because their household is not safe, or they can't live with their parents anymore, or they don't have parents etc. And because of this some of the boys are very unruly, a lot of them haven't had a great education, and some of them don't have very good social skills or manners (Lisa).

She describes how she finds it difficult to work with boys from poor, Black, inner-city backgrounds. Difference is not limited to the 'Third World' but defined along lines of race and class.

When confronted with the harsh realities of places they visit, the participants often speak about 'culture shock', framed by comparing the contrasts between rich and poor. Anna's reflections upon the contemporary situation in South Africa and the legacy of apartheid examine living conditions:

> Many of the people living in the townships have HIV and other diseases. Although the government is trying to improve their living conditions, it is hard to do this. In this one township alone, there are over 1 million people. Unemployment is high and the p[o]verty is blantant [blatant] (Anna).

In some respects, Anna demonstrates an understanding of the local, and we might consider this to be evidence of the global perspective that can be engendered through a gap year experience (Jones 2005). However, Anna's comments do not really touch upon the *global* conditions that have contributed to this poverty. Moreover, the way that the gappers tended to talk about their own position was in terms of 'luck', a kind of 'global lottery' (Simpson 2004: 689). Owen describes a visit to a local textile manufacturer in India with reference to his own 'lucky' position:

> These guys, or so the management claim, take half of the profit directly into their wages. Never the less it made me shuffle out guiltily as we realised just how lucky we are, being the same age as many of the workers (Owen).

Throughout the gappers' accounts there is a desire to understand the local held in tension with highlighting the value of being 'away'. Difference is something that is desirable, and is not placed in a global context but draws upon binary

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oppositions between home and away; safety and risk; authentic and inauthentic; modern versus traditional; fortunate and unfortunate.

Conclusions

It is not the intention of this paper to criticize young people who undertake gap years, to suggest that they are somehow at fault for reproducing particular discourses, or to make judgments regarding 'true' cosmopolitanism. Its purpose is to offer a critique of the moralizing claims made about the benefits of these experiences: that they increase young people's understandings of the world. The evidence from the study, in line with Simpson's (2004, 2005a, 2005b) work on gap year volunteering, suggests that structural and historical legacies of difference are reproduced in the gappers' understandings and representations of people and places. In a study of student volunteering in the UK, Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) argue such activities are often 'reproductive' in terms of existing power relations and inequalities, rather than 'deconstructive', which would allow young people to develop an awareness of (and critically engage with) social conditions.

There is an analogous tension in the gappers' accounts. On one hand, there is a desire to learn about and understand the local, reflect on global issues and experience what places are 'really like'. We might see this as a globally reflexive tendency in the participants' representations. On the other hand, established discourses are reproduced of an 'Other' that is exoticized, romanticized, or even criticized. We might see this as a globally reproductive element. The participants are not either/or when narrating their encounters with place; this is a continuum that is negotiated. Their blog accounts suggest there is a greater tendency towards more habitual ways of consuming places using pre-established notions of value, for example resonating with ideas about 'good taste', (Bourdieu 1984) rather than providing examples of Giddens's (1991) 'cosmopolitan person'.

What can be done to encourage 'global reflexivity'? Much of the literature on developing cross-cultural understanding centres on volunteering (c.f. Raymond and Hall 2008), although there is also a case for encouraging critical reflection amongst backpackers. There is a need to support Simpson's call for more pedagogically informed gap years, for example through the adoption of her recommendations to draw 'influences from adventure and experiential education, service learning and other travel-based programmes such as the Peace Brigade and VSO' (Simpson 2005a: 231). While Johan (2009: 148) argues that gappers should be trained in skills of reflection to enable transformative learning, there would also be merit in encouraging critiques of the taken-for-granted benefits of such experiences. Holdsworth and Quinn (with reference to UK-based volunteering) highlight the role that universities could play here,

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by linking experiences to new and challenging academic knowledge (Holdsworth and Quinn 2012: 402).

Reflecting on the implications for cosmopolitan sensibilities, we could classify the gappers' framing of place as evidence of banal cosmopolitanism (Beck 2002), if the gappers' encounters with diversity are simply a consequence of increased mobility incorporated into everyday experiences. Yet this does not seem to do justice to their enthusiastic and sincere attempts to understand 'the Other'. Another possibility would be to see the gappers' narratives as evidence of Skrbis and Woodward's 'ordinary cosmopolitanism', which is a repertoire to be drawn upon, 'a negotiated frame of reference', (Skrbis and Woodward 2007: 745). Their definition identifies it as a property of individuals making reflexive judgments however, and I have argued there is little evidence of sustained reflexive engagement due to the use of established cultural frames to articulate experience. More useful here is the concept of 'self-referential cosmopolitanism' (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005), in which individuals aim to identify with others who hold similar views. The gappers may adopt a cosmopolitan identity and are attracted to the idea of appreciating global culture but ultimately, their gap year stories are framed by the references of home and undertaken as part of an experience that will be advantageous in home contexts. This also suggests the saliency of Hage's (2000) work on cosmopolitan capital, where a taste for (racialized) difference lies behind discourses of cosmopolitanism. However, for a study of cosmopolitanism, this paper does not escape Beck's (2002) critique of methodological nationalism, as it focuses solely on young people from the UK. Lyons et al. (2012) note the need for systematic study of the outcomes of gap years beyond a British context that would combine large-scale generalizable survey analyses with qualitative examinations. This would also be able engage with work on the relationship between forms of cosmopolitanism and social structural factors (e.g. Woodward, Skrbis and Bean 2008).

This article has put forward the case for a particular sensitivity to frames when analysing narratives of place. To be able to describe places, we need to draw on the resources available to us, and the frames in the gap year narratives tend to align with dominant meanings and values. The way places are constructed are crucial to why overseas gap years have value, as stressing the difference of places underlines the difference of experience, and thus the self-development possibilities of coping with diversity. While cosmopolitan dispositions may be valuable resources in an increasingly globalized context, they have 'limits' (Skrbis and Woodward 2007) and are tied to new forms of distinction. Moreover, if this tends to reproduce established frames, we can question the basis for the value of gap years. In turn, we can question the moral evaluations that are employed in proclaiming their benefits.

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Notes

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2. Defined as knowledge, objects and experiences with legitimate cultural value that can be exchanged for future benefits and that are associated with higher social status. See Bourdieu (1997[1986]).

3. Although Turner reserves the term liminality for religious rites, and uses the term 'liminoid' for secular/leisure activities.

4. I would argue, however, that the rules of home are not completely suspended.

5. The parallels with critiques of gap year placements are noted by these authors.

6. See Beck's (2002) discussion of 'banal cosmopolitanism' and Szerszynski and Urry's (2006) 'banal globalism'.

7. For further discussion of the use of blogs in social research, including issues of authenticity, see Hookway (2008) and Snee (2012).

8. For an extended discussion of this argument, see Snee (2012).

9. As noted by Germann Molz (2006), cosmopolitan dispositions are an embodied way of being. The round the world travellers in her study, however, embodied global mobility through adopting the travel practices and aesthetic style of 'backpackers', rather than 'fitting in' with locals.

10. Although senses of belonging are engendered by feelings of comfort within one's locality (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005).

11. Nepali for 'no'.

12. This is an 'emoticon', a textual representation of a facial expression – in this case, denoting alarm.

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