

## IJIDI: Book Review

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In *Beyond Guilt Trips: Mindful Travel in an Unequal World*, Dr. Anu Taranath explores the promises and problems inherent in travelling to "exotic", "impoverished", or "developing" countries. Dr. Taranath, an esteemed professor at the University of Washington, is deeply involved in its Comparative History of Ideas (CHID) program, a "one-of-a-kind interdisciplinary major." (University of Washington), (2019). She also runs Dr. Anu Consulting: A Dialogue for Justice and is a sought-after speaker and facilitator on issues of diversity, inclusion, education, and travel. Through CHID and her consulting work, Dr. Taranath organizes and/or leads study trips for university students who are seeking first-hand experiences of another culture or country as a part of their post-secondary education. Throughout the book, it is evident that Dr. Taranath is writing from a wealth of personal experience and academic research as well as a genuine interest in transformational cross-cultural conversation.

*Beyond Guilt Trips* is a unique combination of analysis, reflection, and integrated understanding of post-colonial, feminist, intersectional, and educational theories intertwined with Eastern spiritual philosophies. This is not a standard academic tome, a light travel memoir, nor a prescriptive travel guide for the well-meaning Westerner. Most chapters of the book employ a layout that bridges the academic or theoretical with the personal or practical. Dr. Taranath tends to introduce difficult concepts by paraphrasing or quoting a theorist, a novelist or a specialist of some kind. She reads widely and is inspired by the works of poets, novelists, activists, and academics in a variety of fields. Some of the instantly recognisable novelists are Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and James Baldwin. Not as well known to me are the writers Gloria Anzaldúa, Kamal Al-Solaylee, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Her theorists span the academy and include Audre Lorde, Kobena Mercer, Eli Clare, Kimberle Crenshaw, Michelle Liu, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Peggy McIntosh, and Edward Said. Some of the main concepts discussed in the book, or that subtly inform the analysis, include: intersectionality, the other, the mythical norm, hyper-visibility, and invisibility, Western gaze, colonialism, imperialism, and neo-liberalism. After Dr. Taranath introduces a concept, for example, Audre Lorde's "mythical norm," she relates a first-person account from one of her trips abroad as an educator, a student or a traveller. She closes the chapters with the sections "Holding Space" and "Holding Space Together." Here Dr. Taranath invites the reader to reflect on the issue or theme by asking questions that encourage empathy for themselves and for others. Many of her suggestions for reflection stem from Eastern spiritual traditions and she emphasizes mindfulness practice, the development of empathy, and the cultivation of sensory perceptions as a means to gain perspective, equilibrium, and wisdom.

As an immigrant woman of colour living in the Global North, the book resonates with me. I have

asked, and continue to ask myself, "should I be here?", "what am I doing here?", and "for whose benefit am I here?" when travelling outside Canada. The degree of questioning or discomfort changes depending on my travel destination. Dr. Taranath believes that this is a natural and useful beginning to any journey. Using her position as a woman, an immigrant, an academic, an educator, and as a mother, she explores the complicated relationship all of us have with the history of our home country, our current home, and with each other. The complexity of everyone's identity (including White and Western persons) is an outcome of the legacy of imperialism and colonialism. Dr. Taranath quotes Robert Gordan, who states that "travel reproduces in large part relations similar to those that imperialism did..." (p. 115). Gordan further asserts that travellers who choose Global South destinations to "acquire nature, sun, beaches, sex, and adventures" are mirroring imperialists who sought wealth and resources from these very same regions (p. 115). These statements clarified for me why, as a woman of colour who was raised working class, I feel uncomfortable hearing about people's enthusiasm for vacations in the Global South. To me, old inequalities are being kept alive under the new disguise of a quick, cheap getaway. Furthermore, the inherent racism in expecting people to live in impoverished conditions so that I can experience a good time for less just rankles.

While some people in the Global North may be introspective about their reasons for travelling to the Global South, Dr. Taranath explains how difficult it can be for others to understand the complicated power dynamics that are at play when we board a plane. She uses Audre Lorde's theory of power emanating from the "mythical norm" as a way to explain how people can be more or less attuned to the problematics of "sun and sand" travel. Lorde states that, "somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call the mythical norm ... In the West, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside..." (p. 49). The most interesting and powerful element of Dr. Taranath's book is that she teases apart these intersecting elements of race, size, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, and class. Yes, there are some people who have all the markers of power, but in real life, most people are like the volume button of a stereo: they are moved (or are moving themselves) up and down the powerless-to-powerful dial depending on their context. She argues that depending on the country a person visits, the combination of these personal identifications will influence how she/he/they will experience the culture and how the people in that culture will experience her/him/they. I valued Dr. Taranath's argument that there is no inevitability that power, pleasure, or status always goes to a White man or a White woman.

One of the joys of travel is the promise it holds to upend the societal or cultural norms we experience in our backyard. Dr. Taranath observes that hyper-visibility and under-visibility, which can be oppressive at home, can be affirming and uplifting abroad. Hyper-visibility, as any immigrant child at school knows, means that differences are perceived as markers of inequality or inferiority. Travel, however, can help us learn a new narrative. As an example of positive super-visibility Dr. Taranath was "fawned over" (as she states it) in Brazil for her perfect brown skin whereas her White but fluently Spanish-speaking friend was ignored. Or in the case of racialized queer people in the United States, the invisibility of their intersecting identities can often make for a lonely existence; but, travelling abroad, the lack of notice can be peaceful. For example, one of Dr. Taranath's student, a gay Chicano man, felt more comfortable in the homosocial culture of southern India than the racist culture of U.S. In the U.S., this invisibility was a product of others refusing to see him, yet in India it was felt as a peaceful merge into the street scape as another brown man.

The book is an interesting read. One quibble I had with it is the lack of a bibliography (though there is an index). It is very difficult to determine which article, book, novel, or poem Dr. Taranath is quoting or using. The other quibble is the sometimes repetitive nature of the passages—it seemed that a more rigorous edit would have pulled the themes and concepts in tighter. These are only small issues. Overall, I believe that Dr. Taranath persuades us that conscientious global travel is possible if we keep our eyes, ears, and hearts open. And ask a lot of questions of ourselves before, during, and after the journey. The wealth of insight contained in *Beyond Guilt Trips* makes it an important book for educators and students in the fields of health, education, social work, sociology, and anthropology. A growing trend in universities is the development of programs or courses to turn students into “Global Citizens”. These programs, however well-meaning, have the potential to reinforce the imperial/colonial dynamic whereby students from the Global North gain even more advantages (another culture, another course, another experience) by visiting the Global South. Hopefully, a critical mass of educators will read *Beyond Guilt Trips* and understand the promises and problems of this kind of educational opportunity and develop truly useful internships, placements, and trips abroad for their students.

### References

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