

Taranath, Anu. (2019). *Beyond Guilt Trips: Mindful Travel in an Unequal World*. Lutsen, MN: Between the Lines Publishing. 208 pages.

Continuing the Conversation: A Response to Anu Taranath's *Beyond Guilt Trips: Mindful Travel in an Unequal World*

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I remember my parents would take me to work with them as a young child. As Mexican immigrants, my mother earned a living as a housekeeper and my father as a gardener; they often worked in the same house. The people they worked for were always wealthy, white, older adults with beautiful, spacious homes. Before entering, my mother would remind me to behave and keep quiet. I enjoyed my time there. I was allowed to watch cartoons on large televisions or play make-believe in their fairy-tale-like backyards. On our ride back home, I would wonder, “why is our home so different?” but I never said the words aloud.

I offer this story as the start of my review of *Beyond Guilt Trips* because this book has been helpful in making sense of these, as well as many other, past experiences. I was introduced to this book when my professor asked me if I was interested in reading and writing a review about it. After reading the first 20 pages, I agreed. *Beyond Guilt Trips* captivated me with its honest storytelling and relentless approach to confronting life's harsh realities, while reminding the reader of the importance of simple joys that find a way to prevail amid struggle.

Taranath eloquently explains how travel, be it across the globe or to the other side of town, sheds light upon systemic inequities of privilege and power that affect the world and its inhabitants. In many ways the book serves as a guide to help us reflect on our emotions and identities with the intent of fostering discussion. The thoughtful questions and analysis presented in this book brought to life a kind of conversation between Taranath and I. While reading, an open space took shape where I could engage with her while reflecting on and unpacking my travel experiences. The conversation continued outside the book as I took courage to start discussions with friends and family about the uncomfortable feelings we experience as a result of privilege, inequities, and discrimination while traveling.

Feelings and thoughts similar to those that arose in me during my travel experiences close to home can often happen to others on their travels farther away. Those feelings and thoughts can sometimes have an all-consuming power but *Beyond Guilt Trips* gives readers support throughout their journey. A central theme Taranath dissects is the importance of interrupting “business-as-usual thinking” with the use of a critical and compassionate lens. In our modern way of life, we often shy away from heavy, complicated, and meaningful discourse and thought; we tend to prefer predictability, safety, and well-versed scripts. This leaves our emotions to brew and boil and

eventually explode into arguments, prejudice, and hate. To help us avoid that fate, Taranath suggests that readers explore injustices critically while also remembering to look for the good in life. Most importantly, Taranath reminds us to take time to search for and recognize joy, in all the forms it can take. She sees this joy as essential to maintaining momentum in our efforts to make just changes.

This August, I began an international education management master's program at a private school just fifteen minutes away from home. I felt confident, proud, and ready to start on the first day of orientation; however, those feelings quickly turned to uncertainty and apprehension. I felt like I did not belong to a community filled with people who were well-traveled, knowledgeable, and mostly Caucasian. I was no longer surrounded by the usual comforts of the racial and socio-economic diversity I experience just six miles away. It rattled me that I could feel so lost in a place I had frequented all my life. For the first couple of months, I walked around campus feeling like an outsider, overly cautious of interaction, and hypercritical of how I presented myself as well as of others. Identifying our differences was easy, almost automatic.

Although I had read about cognitive biases during my undergraduate studies as a psychology major, *Beyond Guilt Trips* reminded me of how easily we fall prey to them. As humans with an innate drive for belonging and acceptance, we create in-groups. The danger of doing so is that it inherently creates out-groups. Taranath prompts readers to take a step back and analyze our approaches so that we acknowledge and accept differences while also looking for similarities to function as bridges. I was so focused on how people were different that as a result I was too scared to engage with my peers. Once I dropped my guard, I could see how we shared many similarities. We were not that different after all.

As a student in international education, I found *Beyond Guilt Trips* to be a resource-rich book. But more than that, as an educator in my community, a sister, a friend, a traveler, an advocate for peace and justice, and as a human being learning to be kind to herself, this book has brought valuable insight to my life. *Beyond Guilt Trips* is for anyone who wants support while addressing uncomfortable feelings and offers readers an honest and safe reflection space and new ways of disrupting unjust systems.

No matter how far I go, every day holds new challenges and feelings while I continue traveling to and from home. Feelings of guilt, privilege, belonging, and exclusion are constantly stirring inside me. By sharing my stories and my fears, I hope to have helped Taranath expand this long-stifled conversation about guilt, privileges, and disparities relating to race, socio-economics, and more.

The Importance of Being Conscientious When Traveling Abroad: A Response to Anu Taranath's *Beyond Guilt Trips: Mindful Travel in an Unequal World*

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Anu Taranath's *Beyond Guilt Trips* explores the various complexities related to Westerners'

identities in both international and domestic communities. I say “explore” because many of the questions are too complex to have a single answer, or are dependent on the identity of the person that is asked. There is also great focus placed on individuals traveling from the global North to the global South, and what that means in regards to privilege and disadvantages based on gender, preconceived race, or economic status. Taranath then goes further and discusses the traveler’s role abroad, but also how it continues when we are reintegrated into our domestic communities. The experience of having culture shock abroad and then having it again when returning home helps us notice privileges, inequalities, and/or disparities within our communities that we never realized before. The overall perspective of this book is aimed at helping those of us who have traveled abroad or will in the future to really explore the complex feelings that we might experience in regards to our identity, and also how it relates to a historical context.

I like that Taranath does a great job at showing how the navigation of individuals from the global North to the global South is not just important but critical in understanding how dynamics even within the West share similarities with communities abroad. As a Black man living in the United States, society has constantly reinforced my supposed placement at the lower end of the societal racial hierarchy. The effects of this are shown through a lack of resources for educational institutions within Black communities, a more militarized police presence in Black communities, and devaluing of land based on the size of the Black population within the area. As Black people, we are not taught these dynamics, but rather we live them. This relates to *Beyond Guilt Trips* because many times our white counterparts do not know this is happening, or do not realize this inequality until taking their first African American history course in university. One scenario within the book that I like, which demonstrates this dynamic, is shown in the story of Katherine visiting a less-privileged high school only twenty minutes away from her neighborhood. Katherine, with her other upper-class white schoolmates, is presenting to a high school that is predominantly Latino and Black about the planning of her school’s upcoming West Africa study abroad trip. As she finishes her presentation, she asks, “Are there any questions?” Then a Black student named Ali asks, “You all are going to mother Africa? But Africa is our continent!” Ali’s comment is important to me because it cuts right through the idea that everyone has an equal opportunity within U.S. society, and is also filled with the disadvantages and advantages that history has ascribed to individuals based on identity within U.S. culture. I think that Taranath uses this story to show that many times we are eager to travel abroad for new experiences, to become more globally aware, or in hopes of learning about a new culture, but I wonder why it is that we don’t see these opportunities for learning within our own country? Why is it that Katherine knew so little about the inequalities in a neighborhood that is only twenty minutes away from her own community?

I think it is important that Taranath raises another powerful question of what we as Westerners can do in regards to injustices that we see in the global South. Sometimes the injustice is economic, i.e., disparities between ourselves and the average person living in the communities that we are visiting. Other times it is overt, like companies forcing workers to interact with toxic chemicals because they know they can exploit individuals abroad easier than in the West. Taranath discusses the idea of “holding space.” “Holding space” is when we focus on the story or critiques of individuals who may make us feel uncomfortable because their livelihood or experience points out our own privileges.

I personally could relate to this idea of “holding space” when I studied abroad in Tanzania. Like many African Americans in the United States, I come from a lower socioeconomic status, yet in Tanzania I was considered wealthy, at least in comparison to the average person. When my Tanzanian friends would tell me stories about their economic problems, or view me as privileged, there was nothing that I could really say—they were right. The hardest thing I had to figure out is what could I do to leverage my privilege. My ability to travel to Tanzania, and enter their communities and leave when I wanted, was solely based on the fact that history afforded me the opportunity to grow up in the West, a place with more opportunities. It was literally the luck of the draw that I was born in the United States. At the very least, I thought, I could “hold space” and allow them to tell me their stories. This did not fix the situation, but it did allow them to experience being heard and recognized, and not be rebutted. “Holding space” also allowed me to work through my own complex feelings, and furthered my ability to lean into being uncomfortable because that is how I can build a true connection with those I encountered abroad. Before I read *Beyond Guilt Trips*, I intuitively knew that every human deserves to be treated with respect, but Taranath improved the depth of my understanding of the importance of that by explaining the term “holding space” and also emphasizing its importance when traveling abroad.

The complex emotions that come with how our identities are perceived and how privilege is relative can be navigated more efficiently by using many of the tips and “holding spaces” sections within *Beyond Guilt Trips*. This book differs from other works regarding inequalities abroad in that it connects our complex feelings abroad to how we also feel regarding the dynamics at play in our own countries. The exploration of privilege and oppression doesn’t just happen in a global North vs. global South relationship, but also works intersectionally in the domestic country. If one is looking to travel conscientiously while also being able to see the bigger picture in regards to identity and privilege, I highly recommend this book.

“Hear” We Stand: A Response to Anu Taranath’s *Beyond Guilt Trips: Mindful Travel in an Unequal World*

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As a white-passing Chicana person, the legacy of colonialism is embedded in my DNA and reflected in the way I look. My white-passing identity extends me privileges in some areas while my cultural and ethnic upbringing and history pushes me into a non-dominant group within the context of the United States. I am a second-generation U.S. citizen; my grandparents emigrated from Mexico. Knowing what my grandparents and parents have sacrificed and endured to establish themselves in this country, I struggle to ask for help. I often try to convince myself that I can tackle any challenge in different aspects of my life like my education, career goals, and even emotional health. I struggle because I think about how much “easier” I have it, or have the internalized notion that I must do it on my *own* despite my cultural values of community support. Furthermore, the imposition of colonial gender roles and the Western gender binary means that my gender non-conforming body is often under surveillance from the cisgender-heteronormative gaze. A

“scholarship” student navigating a first-generation college experience at a private university, my positionality puts me in privileged and underrepresented groups.

My identity is somewhat of a puzzle wherein I must navigate privilege and oppression. I occupy different spaces with respect to power and I am ever aware of my body in each place I encounter. Anu Taranath’s book, *Beyond Guilt Trips: Mindful Travel in an Unequal World*, speaks to the ways our own unique positionalities can stir complex feelings as we travel, whether within one’s own city or to a distant country. Furthermore, Taranath’s blending of different literary styles reflects the messiness of engaging in mindful travel in an unequal world. The style and structure is evocative of the following: the unique identities of the people we are and will encounter, different stages of studying abroad or travel in general, and diverse forms of expression for feelings of discomfort or reflections of experiences in world travel. This text embodies what it means to extend knowledge production beyond formal academic research to include: first-hand experiences, storytelling, positionality as active engagement, and humility as method. Taranath’s work encourages us to “hear” ourselves and one another. She also reminds us to “stand” up in our own authentic ways.

I studied abroad in Galway, Ireland in the spring of 2019 during my junior year. This book has been helpful in validating my experiences. The author spoke directly to my experiences when she described diving into academic literature and research to deflect feelings of vulnerability or discomfort. The lack of social awareness and different levels of experience in conversations concerning race made some classroom discussions very uncomfortable and instead of sitting with my feelings I would often immediately pick up a book or article to try to better understand the historical context or find the language for what I was feeling.

In a conversation about belonging and identity, I shared with my all Irish classmates and professor that I struggle with my identity and belonging as a white-passing Chicanx person in the United States, feeling like I’m not fully a part of either group, culturally, physically, and linguistically. The professor then, without my consent, expanded on what I shared to teach the class about the struggles for people with intersecting identities. The professor stated that my situation was “the classic immigrant family tale,” that I “may never find any relief in this conflict and may be destined to struggle forever,” and my “ancestors never could have imagined I would be here [Ireland] studying abroad.” After this class, I broke down. Even when I tried to set my positionality or humanize my experience, whiteness can be silencing and violent. No academic research would help me process this at its beginning stages.

With regards to sitting with discomfort, pain, and confusion, this encounter showed me that I had not really been processing my experiences of microaggressions, racism, and heteronormativity for most of my life. In endeavoring to check my privilege, seeking opportunities to listen to different stories and experiences, and processing feelings of guilt for having more than some, *I was not listening to my own story. I was not telling my own.* I may have been telling aspects of my story, but I was not sharing feelings of being silenced, other-ed, or used as a case study to “teach” academic concepts. This is what resonates with me about Taranath’s work—she creates space to have conversations around power and privilege, encouraging all positions to self-interrogate and share with one another for we do not need to tackle systems of oppression and injustice alone. She reminds us that we do not need to hide our emotions and frustrations as we engage in those efforts.

The notion of community as power emerges in this book as well. It's important to foster a community of engagement and inquiry that allows travelers to unpack feelings and thoughts, especially those that are uncomfortable and confusing. Though there are some important ideas to remember, I want to remind students, faculty, and staff participating in study programs that it is not the sole responsibility of students of color, queer folx, trans people, disabled community members, first-generation students, immigrants, and bodies targeted by institutional diversity and inclusion programming to craft methods for conversation and community building. I echo Taranath's call for accountability, especially for folx with intersecting identities that place them in positions of privilege. It's important to consider the time, place, and context in which we unpack our feelings while traveling. Checking in with group members before asking tough questions can be helpful, as can journaling or having a private conversation before bringing vulnerability to the group. Self-awareness extends beyond self in relation to the local people we encounter and must include the consideration of folx we travel with, even if we hail from the same country. Our experiences will be different and we need to always be aware of that.