

Beyond Guilt Trips

Mindful Travel in an
Unequal World

Anu Taranath

Illustrated by Ronald "Otts" Bolisay

Between the Lines
Toronto

"*Beyond Guilt Trips* is a fantastic guide to encountering cultural difference in productive ways."

—Timothy Longman, associate professor of Political Science
and International Relations, Boston University

"Though there are many books and guides that discuss the importance of being good eco-travelers, there are few that help us to be good "anthro-travelers." *Beyond Guilt Trips* takes us deep into that world, providing tools for deeper awareness and engagement during our interactions with unfamiliar cultures and individuals. Taranath helps us to navigate our inner and outer journeys, and to return home with a profoundly enriched view of our world."

—Jeff Greenwald, author of *The Size of the World*, director of
EthicalTraveler.org

"Over the past twenty years I've led groups on tours and explored the globe on my own, travelling to over fifty countries. The search for deeper meaning is consistent through it all. Taranath is an expert at recognizing deeply felt issues and providing an approach that is inclusive and fulfilling. Let her be your guide through whatever travels you have ahead!"

—Ben Cameron, Rick Steves' Europe tour guide

"This is the guide I wished I'd had when first starting to travel the world as a young person. Packed with wisdom and useful tips, *Beyond Guilt Trips* should be in all campus libraries, youth hostels, and community organizations."

—Faith Adiele, author of *Meeting Faith* and founder of VONA
Travel Writing

"Taranath skillfully blends storytelling with a guidebook approach to how we can all travel better—go beyond good intentions and become intentional travelers. A much-needed book to transform the travelscape."

—Amy Gigi Alexander, editor-in-chief, *Panorama: the Journal of Intelligent Travel*

"Taranath illuminates perspectives that many of us seldom consider but are vital to our understanding of our neighbors and ourselves, both at home and abroad."

—Larry Habegger, executive editor, Travelers' Tales Books

"I am so grateful for this book, for it left me reflecting on the one trip we are all on, traveling through this life! Taranath is an excellent and humble storyteller who teaches us through stories. Readers will find nuggets here that will help us all to be our best selves."

—Michele E. Storms, executive director, American Civil Liberties Union, Washington State

"Anu's writing never sugarcoats, but helps us speak about unequal structures, uncomfortable facts, and our own positions as we travel five or five thousand miles from what's familiar. This isn't just a book to read; it's a way to walk in the world."

—Dr. Peter Moran, former director, University of Washington Study Abroad Office

"At a time when it has become radical to ask ourselves what it means to be who we are, where we are, *Beyond Guilt Trips* holds space for these conversations where there wasn't any before."

—Bani Amor, queer travel writer

"*Beyond Guilt Trips* offers a consciousness-raising for travelers, even as it shows us ways to stay present and compassionate amidst a sea of potential confusion, doubt, and guilt."

—Laurie Hovell McMillin, editor of *Away Journal*

"Taranath offers the reader sympathetic understanding while firmly naming the realities and complexities of the unjust societies we inhabit and create. While she does not let us off the hook, she consistently brings us back to our shared humanity. I wish this book had been available when I first began to travel abroad."

—Tina Lopes, co-author of *Dancing On Live Embers: Challenging Racism in Organizations*

"Taranath unflinchingly confronts the awkward feelings of guilt, shame, and privilege that inevitably arise from international (and even inter-neighborhood) travel, and somehow manages to stare them down, deconstruct them, and take away their power. *Beyond Guilt Trips* is an essential companion to all those leading, engaging in, or contemplating travel, to ensure they will embark on an inward journey that mirrors the outward one."

—Claire Bennett, co-author of *Learning Service: The Essential Guide to Volunteer Travel*

"*Beyond Guilt Trips* is part reflective memoir, part ethnographic deep-dive, and part user manual for navigating our increasingly unequal world. . . This book is certainly the most teachable—and instructive—book on global travel I have read yet."

—David Citrin, Global Health and Anthropology, University of Washington

"*Beyond Guilt Trips* unpacks some of the biggest racial and cultural issues facing Westerners traveling abroad. In straightforward language, Taranath addresses white privilege, micro-aggressions, inequality, and the unspoken rules of race and economics that travelers face when visiting foreign cultures. Simple, necessary, and razor-sharp, this book is an accessible and friendly guide for anyone interested in learning how to 'sit with discomfort.'"

—Adriana Paramo, author of *Looking for Esperanza and My Mother's Funeral*

"When Mark Twain observed that travel was fatal to bigotry and narrow-mindedness, he somehow predicted we would have this wise and timely book in hand. Taranath shows us how to build a toolbox of keen observation, respectful engagement, and honest examination as we move among our neighborhoods as well as through our world."

—David Fenner, Peace Corps volunteer 1979–82, founding director, World Learning Oman Center, former assistant vice provost for international education, University of Washington

"This book takes us into the heart of where we need to go if we truly aim to do away with injustice and transform the world."

—Michael Westerhaus MD, MA and Amy Finnegan PhD, co-directors, SocMed

"Instead of guilting or shaming people when they become more aware of their privilege or wealth, *Beyond Guilt Trips* brings everyone along without erasing histories of oppression. With a generous spirit, Taranath holds space for both the learning of travelers and the dignity of the people they encounter, offering the possibility of meaningful mutual exchange."

—Frances Lee, writer and cultural activist

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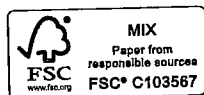
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ONTARIO
CREATES

Education does not make us educable. It is our awareness of being unfinished that makes us educable.

—PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF FREEDOM:
ETHICS, DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC COURAGE*

The learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot.

—AUDRE LORDE, *SISTER OUTSIDER*

Planes carry passengers. What passengers carry on their consciences, their guilt, grievances, goodwill is hard to say.

—ROMESH GUNESSEKERA, *NOONTIDE TOLL*

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PROLOGUE

Beyond Guilt Trips: Practical Application for Travelers

TONI MORRISON WROTE, "IF THERE'S A BOOK THAT YOU WANT TO read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." I took Ms. Morrison's sentiment to heart, and this is that book. As I began to write, I recorded the kinds of discomfoting feelings I and many Western travelers I know experienced, but hadn't seen represented in a book form. I pictured my reader: a well-intentioned young adult from the West who travels to low-income countries in the Global South. This person feels sensitivity and curiosity for others, though hasn't necessarily had much exposure to or experience with conversations about identity, race, diversity, and equity; access to resources; structural oppression; and how all these issues might play out in people's lives.

During the writing and research process, I began to realize that the guilt and discomfort we may experience abroad on account of the differences in race, resources, and culture oftentimes mimic the guilt and discomfort we may experience much closer to home as we move through different neighborhoods and communities, or even work

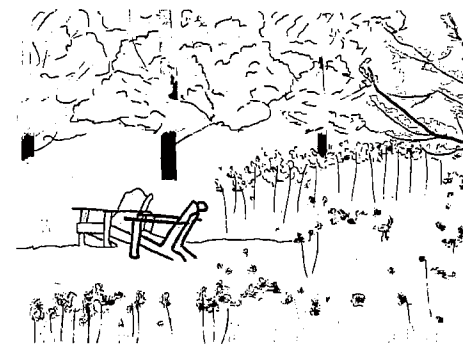
with different kinds of people. Put differently, experiencing guilt and discomfort when we're far away from home and experiencing guilt and discomfort when we're nearer to home are all instances of difficult-to-navigate feelings that can be useful to unpack, process, and reflect upon. These feelings are connected in many ways and originate from similar historical processes that have to do with identity, power, and social hierarchies. So while this book is for you if you're, say, embarking on a study abroad program to South Africa or currently in the middle of your governmental or NGO volunteer placement in Cameroon, this book is also for you if you're a student in the West enrolled in a service-learning course. It's for you if you're preparing to do field research abroad or community-based research and scholarship closer to home, engaged in faith-based service projects at home or abroad, or interning in an afterschool program or a local non-profit focused on providing resources to disadvantaged populations in your town or city.

You need not, though, have traveled, volunteered, or even be a student to find something useful in these pages. This book can be a resource if you're craving productive conversation on diversity, equity, and identity issues as part of staff professional development in your public agency, school district, library system, company, or firm. If you've got a "diversity, equity, and inclusion" committee at your workplace or are having diversity challenges of many sorts, this could be a suitable book to inspire constructive dialogue and model conversation. It could even be useful for your school or college as a common text to read and discuss if you're part of a campus-wide "day of service," like the one typically held in the United States on Martin Luther King Jr. Day every January, or Canada's National Volunteer Week held yearly in April. Though most of the examples I've used throughout the book relate to international travel, the underlying issues of who we are and how we might notice and navigate our differences in an unfair world can relate to any of us, both at home and abroad.

Though this isn't a typical memoir, I often describe my own experiences as a way to invite you to consider your own journeys from a broader perspective. Throughout the book, you'll also hear from a wide range of student travelers who reflect on their journeys across race and class in lands both far and near. Though I've often used pseudonyms and changed identifying details, all the stories you'll read are based on true experiences. Some stories focus on my own travels with groups of students or on my own. Some draw from conversations I've had with travelers, tourists, program directors, group leaders, volunteers, and students traveling abroad; others draw from student assignments, focus groups, email correspondence, or field report journals.

Politics of Care

It might be helpful to say a bit about where this book is located politically and socially. All of my work is embedded in a politics of care, transformative social change, and deep justice for both ourselves and others. When I think about my ideal vision for how our society should be, I'd like to see a society in which all people enjoy the benefits and riches of a quality life, not just those who have power, wealth, educational access, a particular skin color or body shape. I'd like a society in which we can all love who we'd like to love and look how we'd like to look. A society where all of us enjoy good nutrition and healthcare, green trees, and warm homes. A society in which kids play and read books and where all of us feel heard,



seen, and validated. I'd like a society in which we all have enough—not just a few of us, but all of us.

Our world though is not set up like this. The sad truth of our status quo is that too many of us—both in our own communities and around the world—feel ostracized and live without enough of too many things: opportunity, safety, peace, and security. Many of us want to remedy these problems, and so we work for social justice in both small and big ways. We investigate and question the “business-as-usual” status quo, search for ways to be more equitable, and forge paths toward personal and community wellbeing. When we critically notice our surroundings and ask questions about how systems of power confer advantages for some and difficulties for others, we practice the first steps toward interrupting unfair systems. When more of us wonder why business-as-usual often means more opportunity, safety, peace, and security for fewer of us we build a stronger movement for accountability and change.

Movements for peace and justice must dismantle unfair power structures, but must also prioritize loving relationships between people. My sense of justice work is compassion-based and intensely local, no matter where in the world I might be. My approach is similar to Frances Lee's, a scholar who writes about activist culture: “I believe in ‘yes and’ methods of justice work; yes, a historical system of oppression operates in our society that results in mass inequity and harm, and we all have the capacity to recognize the humanity in each other and forge genuine connections.” Justice work for me is not only about working to change what is ugly and unequal in society; it is also about going deep into our own personal stories to be more in tune with ourselves, our values, and heartfelt alignment.

Whether you picked up this book on your own or you've been asked to read it by a teacher, program leader, colleague, or professor, the fact that you are holding it signals to me your willingness to consider and engage with the ideas presented. While I won't sugarcoat

things to artificially sweeten the tough parts (because that's not good teaching), please know that I will not shame or blame you for particular features like your race, wealth, gender, being raised in a high-income country, or anything you do not control. Maya Angelou has said, “I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” In my opinion, shame and blame can be useful tools for political movements, but they do not constitute good teaching and often do not result in good learning. Shame, in fact, corrodes our connections to one another and keeps us isolated. *Beyond Guilt Trips* is meant to do the exact opposite. I will not shame and blame you for any of your identities and advantages and, rather, will ask you to question your own experiences and place in the world. Together, we can work on transforming our guilt trips across difference into more productive explorations about ourselves and each other.

Though *Beyond Guilt Trips* has been foremost on my mind the last few years, I know this book—or any book, really—cannot shift society. A book's value is only as good as the people who engage with it. Therein lies our potential. James Baldwin's words come to mind: “You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. . . . The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way . . . people look at reality, then you can change it.”

CHAPTER 1

Before You Buy Your Ticket, Read This

Making Connections: Identity and Difference

I BROUGHT MY FOUR-AND-A-HALF-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER TO A COMMUNITY space called Third Place Commons to hear a gospel choir perform on a Sunday afternoon. My kid and I thread our way through the crowd. I lead, her little hand grasping my shirt as a leash. We find a small opening near the front of the stage toward the side. I lift her up so she can see over the heads around us, and together we notice a few children dancing to the music, their parents nearby smiling proudly.

My daughter and I sway to the rhythm, and intermittently she pulls my head toward her to share comments into my ear. From our vantage point, it seems that the two rows of choir members are comprised mostly of Black women, a few Black men, a few Asian American women, and two or three white women. Robust and energetic, the choir director rouses her singers and audience alike with energy and poise. I wonder what it would be like to sing in this choir under the

directorship of a charismatic woman of color like her. In all the choirs I've sung in for over eighteen years, I've always stood out as one of a handful of singers of color, and all of my directors and conductors have been white. I ponder auditioning for the gospel choir up on stage.

My daughter wriggles out of my arms. She stands by me for a moment and then joins the dancers in front of the stage. The children twirl and giggle, and their bodies move to the beats of the choir punctuated by shouts of exuberant praise: "Glory!" "Hallelujah!" My kid ambles back toward me and climbs up in my arms, her attention now shifted to the audience. It seems that the seventy or so people around us are all white men and women, mostly elders with various health aides beside them like canes, wheelchairs, and oxygen tanks. They smile and tap their feet. I find myself wondering if so many older white people have come specifically to hear the gospel choir, or if they are the regular Sunday crowd, appreciating whichever live music group has come to perform. I slowly pan the audience and try to discern individual features and attributes of the people all around me, a strategy I use to stay present and aware of the different kinds of differences that might be around me even when there isn't much racial diversity. The joy of the music pours into my heart, and I watch my daughter alternate her focus from the audience to the choir. It's as if she's at a tennis match: her head snaps this way and that.

Suddenly, my kid shimmies down my body and runs into the audience. I'm surprised at her energy, and am curious as to who or what has compelled this sudden burst. Has she recognized someone we know? Our neighbor, perhaps? I crane my head to take a look at who or what she has found. And then I see.

A Black man and woman have just entered and found seats on the other side of the room. Their Blackness is significant because they are the only other visible people of color in the room besides the choir members, my daughter, and me. My daughter stands right smack in front of them with a big smile on her face. I think about calling her

name to wave her back, unsure why she's parked herself in front of them and worried if she is bothering them. The couple, though, seems to not mind her presence. Though they are unfamiliar to us, I'm surprised to see how easy and comfortable my kid is with them, as if she's known them her whole life. What happened to all those stranger-danger talks we've had? She waves, and the couple waves back. She claps to the music, and they clap with her. Clearly, they are amused by her attention. The three of them laugh and dance and wiggle their bodies to the music together, happy in each other's company.

After a few moments, the man looks around for a parent, a guardian, a relative—anyone who will claim this child. I wave across the room, and we catch glances and smile in greeting. There is relief in his eyes: oh good, he will not have to take this child home. He resumes his play with my daughter with more vigor now that she has been identified as mine. As the audience breaks into applause at the end of a song, my daughter rushes back to me. She yanks my neck and pulls my ear down to share her big news. "Ammi, Ammi! They are brown too—the same color as us!" She says this not in English but in Kannada, the language she and I speak together. To demonstrate her point, she methodically points to three pieces of evidence: the couple sitting across the room, my brown arm, and then hers. The few white people standing near me haven't understood what she's said, but they've seen my daughter point. I watch them as they follow her finger. Their eyes register a moment of surprise when the point lands on the Black couple, and they quickly look away. I immediately feel a combination of defensiveness, embarrassment, and discomfort. Do the people around me think my child is being rude or racist by pointing to the only Black audience members? Come to think of it, do I think she's being rude? Is she being racist? Tangled, my thoughts wander. Wait, what does being rude or racist really mean? Her statement about us being the same color is honest and merely factual. What's wrong with that, I wonder? She simply said what she saw,

and expressed how it made her feel. Acknowledging race is certainly not the same as being racist. Is it somehow wrong for her to feel a connection to the couple across the room? No, I think. That seems ridiculous. Connections on the basis of some shared identity can be a wonderful affirmation of ourselves. You collect manga comic books? So do I! You are from Toronto? Me too! My mind churns: what is honesty and what is rudeness, and who has the power to define the boundaries between the two?

My daughter notices that I've become distracted, and pat-pats my arm a little harder. "Ammi, listen to me! They are also brown!" she says again. I shift my attention from my own ruminations and worries about what the people around me might be thinking back to my kid. I realize that her pat-pats reference race and difference and belonging all at once, and that feels big, expanding my heart in a small way. Before I can say anything to her, she darts back to the couple. The choir belts out a new tune, and the couple and my kid revel in the musical glory.

After the choir takes their final bow, I make my way through the crowd to meet my daughter's new friends. We introduce ourselves and chat about the choir. I tell the couple what my daughter has said about them—"They are brown too!"—and her excitement at this discovery. The man laughs, his large hand resting gently on my daughter's shoulder. "There aren't that many of us brown folks around this part of Seattle, right? Your daughter sure knows what she's talking about." We nod knowingly together and bid each other a warm goodbye.

Noticing Difference—Finding Similarities

Though this scene took place years ago, I've thought about it often. My own questions about what kinds of identities and differences it's okay to notice, when, by whom, and in which context have stayed with me. When my daughter identified with the African American couple

solely on the basis of their skin color, she had zero self-consciousness in her actions, no worry that she might be rude, inappropriate, or crossing a possibly discomforting racial boundary. Kids can be more open and less burdened by many of the social stigmas and nervousness that many of us adults bear. These are the grown-up filters about saying or doing "the right thing" that she would, in due course, learn. But as a four-and-a-half-year-old, my kid simply delighted in the recognition of the shared skin color that was so evident and familiar—and used it as a way to connect.

I appreciate too how the couple graciously received my daughter's attention, especially as some of the few people of color in a roomful of white people. Sometimes it's not always comfortable or easy being somewhat different in a gathering of more-alike-ness, especially when it comes to race. We might feel over-visible and on display, and wonder: "What will people think of me? How should I act? I better try to fit in and not bring more attention to myself." The couple could have felt embarrassed by my daughter's obvious attention and brushed her away, but they didn't. They simply enjoyed the moment, outwardly unconcerned by what others might have thought. Their open attitude sent a powerful message to my daughter about it being okay to not only pay attention and notice who's in the room but to speak it aloud. Their openness validated her quite natural desire to find a sense of belonging within people that looked more like her. The interaction also gave me a tangible moment from which to consider how sometimes our desire to be polite or safe and not ruffle feathers associated with identity and difference might make us miss a beautiful connection, however brief and fleeting.

Many of us have grown up believing that noticing difference—differentiating—means we are somehow being unfair, rude, discriminatory, or just plain wrong. We're often in the in-between-space of not knowing if we should be noticing the differences that we notice, and not knowing how to feel about what it is we are noticing. So many

of us have been socialized to remain silent, anxious, and sometimes unaware of how our identities have been constructed in relation to other people's identities. We might feel that if we don't talk about race and other differences, we are being polite or tolerant. When you or I see differences between ourselves and others, we might be tempted to downplay these differences: "We are actually all just human. Let's focus on our similarities." Some of us even say, "I am colorblind. I don't care if someone is red, purple or polka-dotted. I see all people just as people."

There is something sweet about wanting to imagine that we are all more similar than different, that our essential humanity brings us together, and the West is a melting pot of people and cultures. And yet, let's consider: if our differences actually could be downplayed, why aren't they in our society? Why are the differences between us still so powerful, salient, and visceral? Why do our differences still make us feel a range of complex feelings, even if we are all collectively human?

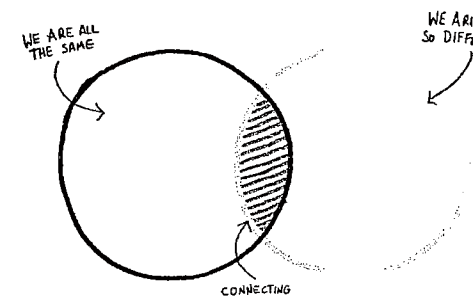
Differences, of course, aren't just superficial identifiers. We cannot ignore differences away when those differences structure our material lives in real ways, offering opportunities and benefits for some and making life more difficult and sometimes unsafe and near impossible for others. Because our differences continue to matter greatly in a world that is hierarchical and structurally unequal, we need to get better at addressing them. As sociologist and race scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes biting about the United States, "The melting pot never included people of color. Blacks, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, etc., could not melt into the pot. They could be used as wood to produce the fire for the pot, but they could not be used as material to be melted into the pot."

The first step is admitting that, yes, we notice different identities. The second step is insisting that, no, noticing isn't necessarily bad. Many of us are not even sure how to admit to these seemingly simple steps, for we've been taught to associate differences in identity

with discomfort. All of us notice all kinds of things about the people around us, but we're not sure how to think or feel about this. If we can't even productively admit to the noticeable differences we all already notice, I'm not sure how we will ever have the conversations we need to have about the legacies of slavery, imperial-

ism, colonialism, and uneven investments in our different communities and what this means for us all. We need to face the ways that these traumatic legacies have warped our conversations about different identities and experiences away from honest openness and more toward silencing discomfort, defensiveness, or other unproductive reactions. This is true especially for those of us who are more advantaged and least affected by the material consequences of this history.

When we recognize that differences between us sometimes matter greatly, we do not necessarily preclude the conditions for connecting. Rather, my belief is that we can connect even better if we learn to acknowledge and reduce the discomfort that usually accompanies interactions across identity, society, and different experiences. Our physical differences and characteristics are right there in front of us all, on display, ordering our world into like-me and not-like-me. I can't look at my colleague with long hair who uses a wheelchair and not see her wheelchair or her long hair. Or look at the thin Latinx man in the gray suit standing behind me in the grocery store line and not see that he's a thin Latinx man in a gray suit. Pretending to not see race and other physical features—or not acknowledging that we see what we see—is an inauthentic and simplistic strategy to actually deal with race and other differences, and speaks volumes about the anxieties



present in society. It also leaves us more vulnerable to implicit bias, a discussion coming up in the next section.

As comedian Hari Kondabolu says, “‘I don’t see race’ is essentially saying ‘I don’t see the uniqueness of your experience and the potential difficulties you face. Also, I am a liar.’” Do we see and register the differences between us? Yes. Should we see and register *only* the differences between us? No. Our differences are both present and real, and they influence our lives in concrete ways. It’s also true that our differences may not always be the most important thing about us. Pat Parker’s poem “To the White Person Who Wants to be My Friend,” begins with this spot-on instruction: “The first thing you do is to forget that I’m Black. Second, you must never forget that I’m Black.” To honestly address each of us with dignity and better understand our complex society, we’ll need to bravely do both: notice our real differences, *and* also know that our differences might not be everything.

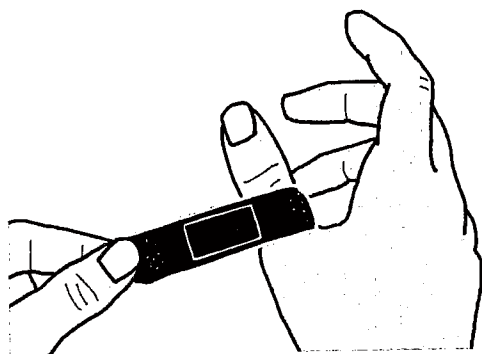
In-Groups and Out-Groups

I wonder if the color connection my daughter felt with the Black couple at the choir concert might be similar to how, say, white Canadian or American backpackers traveling through Barbados or Jamaica might meet each other in a restaurant and develop close bonds over a relatively short period of time. Something about the recognition of sameness and the familiarity it engenders—the experience of being more-alike in a more-different environment—can be extremely seductive to us. It can make us feel seen and validated. How we feel in both contexts matters, whether you’re a small kid at a choir show near home or you’re a student traveler from Calgary finding others like you in the Caribbean. Noticing who’s around us and how that makes us feel isn’t a passive act, but rather, an act of agency. The flip-side of cozy and validating in-group connections are, of course, raw out-

group discrimination and malicious bias, sometimes on a personal level, sometimes systematic and widespread. Being able to speak aloud the nuances of identity can help clarify for us when it’s comforting to focus on our similarities in the midst of difference, and when it’s actually narrow minded.

When I think of why my daughter sprinted off toward the Black couple at the gospel choir show, I also think of implicit biases, those unconscious ways we make sense of our world, order it, and divide people into categories of like me or unlike me. Implicit biases and preferences toward our own in-groups can help explain our unconscious preference for or comfort with people like us. Our unconscious behavior too tilts toward our in-group members, bestowing subtle advantages. We might offer more sympathy to people in our in-groups, give each other the benefit of the doubt, have greater trust and empathy with, and feel more comfortable with the unstated rules. With out-group members, our unconscious mind withholds these subtle advantages and instead replaces them with subtle disadvantages: we might be harsher in our judgements, be less forgiving, and feel more discomfort with the unstated rules between people from different groups. Even when we do not consciously intend to discriminate or give subtle disadvantages to members of out-groups, we unconsciously might treat each other differently based on our identities and perceived and visual differences. I wonder: was that what happened with my daughter at the choir show? Did she act on her unconscious preferences to find a more-like-me connection with the Black couple based on similar skin colors? Perhaps so, but it’s hard to know for sure. While I don’t think she viewed the white elders around us in a particularly negative way, she might have thought the Black couple was “more like us,” more like what she was familiar with at home and in her intimate sphere.

As we become better at noticing and understanding what our different identities mean in society both close to home and when we



travel abroad, we might wonder how our particular stories may be alike or unlike other people's stories. While it's certainly sweet that my daughter found similarities between her skin color and the African American couple's at the choir show, our experiences as an economically privileged South Asian American immigrant fam-

ily with many advantages might look and feel quite different than the lived experience of many Black people in the United States. Our skin colors might be similar but the historical and present manifestations of race and racism make our stories and lived realities quite different. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in *We Were Eight Years in Power*, "Racism is not merely a simplistic hatred. It is, more often, broad sympathy toward some and broader skepticism toward others. Black America ever lives under that skeptical eye." The particular history of anti-Black racism and continued racialization means that being Black in the contemporary United States is certainly different than being the kind of brown my family and I are.

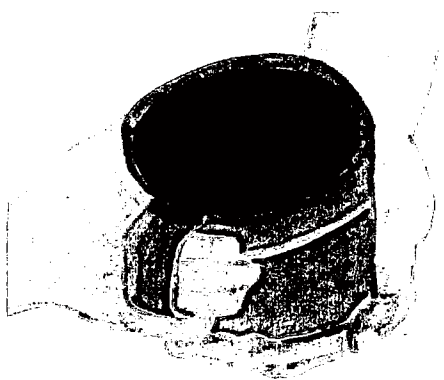
These differences, too, are important to notice and speak aloud, to ask questions about, and to feel within our bones as well as see traces within our neighborhoods. We can ask: How might the history of slavery and the century of Jim Crow structural discrimination affect people's lives nowadays in the United States? How might the Indian Act of 1876 in Canada and other race-based policies affect present-day residential segregation patterns of First Nation and Indigenous people? How might these histories and policies—and the attitudes that accompany them—have implicitly and explicitly shaped the lives, opportunities, and professional trajectories of the African American couple from the choir show, the white elders enjoying the

music, you and me, and so many others? Asking big questions helps us approach our complicated present better, less with *the* answer that will be the prized solution, but rather, with more humility. If we stay safe in silence and simply indulge our discomfort, we'll rarely speak frankly about our identities and experiences and about why those differences might matter in society, to whom, and in which contexts. We are, of course, living in a profoundly unequal world with too many difficulties for too many people. Let's speak aloud these issues, so we might also speak about what it might mean to shift these dynamics into something more humane and respectful for all.

Being Okay with Doses of Discomfort

Even with all my experience expanding my comfort zone and engaging with issues of identity and difference, I still did feel vexed when I watched others watching my daughter point out the Black couple at the choir show. I felt discomfort, yes, but tried to keep steady. I suppose in some ways, that's really the point: to be okay with the overwhelming feelings that we sometimes find ourselves with and not let those feelings take over the moment.

Oftentimes, our first reaction and response to feelings that make us uncomfortable is to want to change them, distract ourselves, or blunt the pain. How we approach topics and feelings that make us uncomfortable can tell us where we are tender, wounded, or raw. Guilt, shame, defensiveness, shutting down, denial, and other complex feelings keep us spinning within ourselves instead of looking up to be present, to better understand how we might untangle our own hurt and begin to interrupt unjust systems. It also prevents us from shining as brightly as we could. In our attempts to eradicate the tough emotions that we'd rather not feel, as researcher Brené Brown says, we also douse the positive ones. "You cannot selectively numb emotion.



When we numb hard feelings, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness." What would it mean if we could soften our discomfort by being more curious about how our various emotions, thoughts, and stories sit in our bodies and play out in our interactions with one another? Might we even make friends with some of our uncom-

fortable feelings instead of rushing to extinguish them?

When we step into conversations about race and other differences, we address two things at once: the present and what's happening in front of us as well as the past and how we came to be where we are. It *is* overwhelming to learn about our history and how social structures were consciously designed to maximize profit and status for some people by keeping others down, especially if people who look like you benefited and continue to benefit from these policies and attitudes. We might feel guilty and bad—strong emotions that often breed silence, defensiveness, and shame. But staying silent and simmering in our guilt only fuels the unequal systems we want to dismantle. Instead, it would be so much more productive if we could step up and boldly notice what's around us and then use those uncomfortable moments as wake-up calls to better understand how we fit together in a much bigger, and yes, painfully unequal story.

A year or so after the gospel choir performance, I ran into the Black couple at a neighborhood shop. We recognized each other immediately. "Honey, look here!" the man had called out to his partner after shaking my hand. "It's the dancing kid's mom from the gospel show last year." He turned back to me. "That sure was a lovely afternoon. We had fun with your daughter. Please tell her that we, her 'brown friends,' say hi."

Stitched and Zipped: My Experience of Studying Abroad

Throughout my youth, my family and I had traveled to India from the United States every few years to visit our grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and extended kin. My family are Indian immigrants, and I grew up in the United States. Though I had experienced these family trips to India as a child, as an undergraduate I wanted more—my own experience of learning and discovery. But my decision to study abroad in India seemed a strange choice for some of my classmates and teachers, one that signaled less a stretching of horizons and more a homecoming. "Why not go to France or Italy?" people asked me. "You already know things about India," they said. "Besides," they added, "won't it be easier studying in Europe?" I'm not opposed to Europe, but had never felt moved by the European stories, architecture, and famous sculptures that peppered the history books I read all through public school.

True, I did know some things about India, but compared to previous trips, this felt radically different. This long trip during college would be the first time I would go to India without my family, and to new areas of the country. In many ways, my story would be the familiar "child of immigrants returning to the homeland to find herself" journey, and I was both petrified and thrilled. My experience justified both these feelings.

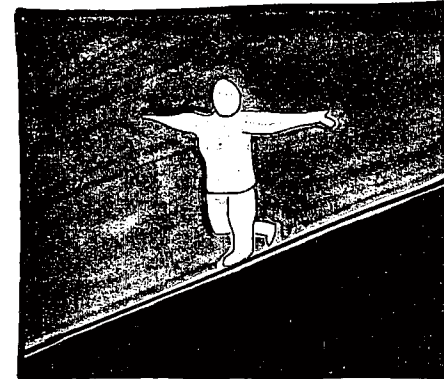
Once there, even though my physical features helped me pass as a local—that is, until people heard my accent—I navigated the following eighteen months in India as a bit of an outsider, somewhat familiar, but still an outsider. This familiarity—however tenuous and fleeting—felt incredible to me, especially since I'd never felt like I properly belonged in the United States, despite having been born and raised in the country.

Throughout my youth, white children teased, taunted, and traumatized me for being brown and different. It started in preschool when kids made up a song about how I must have been dipped in chocolate milk. I vehemently protested, "I don't even like chocolate milk!" but did not understand why the song stung me so. In middle school, kids stuck gum in my hair, shoved me against lockers, and left me standing on the morning bus rides to school because no one gave me space to sit. I was called "curry girl," "backwards," and "too foreign to be American" (the last two by teachers), and repeatedly told that I had "looks that killed," based on the Mötley Crüe song that was popular back then. Though the song might have been written to celebrate the way someone looked, that's certainly not how it was being used to describe me. I hated being treated like this but didn't know how to explain the distress that felt almost physical. Like plumes of smoke, the racism I experienced stung my eyes and made my chest ache. It clung to me—hovering without being solid or named, and always clouding my vision. In response, I did what many of us who feel different and victimized do: I internalized the sadness and anger I felt and began to believe the loud noise from my surroundings that insisted I did not belong.

My coming-up-years, however, were also filled with goodness, warmth, and security. My wonderful parents created a safe and loving home, and we belonged to a community of friends—immigrants like us from the same region of India, who cherished us and made us feel seen. Good friends made me laugh, and I was busy all the time in school with choir, theater, and other activities. As a family, we enjoyed stability, safety, middle-class wealth, and we owned our own home. Going to India for a year and a half as an undergrad, then, pushed and pulled against my childhood experiences in important ways. Though parts of me had been torn apart by the racism of US culture, I found myself in India being nicely stitched back together. My time abroad helped me recognize layers of my family and culture, and know that

where I came from mattered. Without the racist smoke of my youth burning my eyes and snaking up my nose, I started to see myself more clearly and breathe a bit deeper.

But the journey to and within India also unzipped my sense of self by making me question how authentically Indian I could ever be. I wasn't "really" Indian like the Indians around me; I was a privileged American entity mixed with migration and diaspora. Just as parts of me were now stitched back together, different parts of me had become unzipped. I wondered what and who was left of me?



Conversations That Didn't Happen

The actual university program under whose auspices I and the other fourteen students travel on does not provide much support to make sense of our daily experiences, nor our broader cultural stitchings or unzippings. Every few days, the program director makes a grand entrance through the carved wooden doors of the building the program rented in a posh area of town. "How are you all? Fine? Fine?" he thunders, not really waiting for an answer. He pays scant attention to what questions we harbor, how we are taught, what we learn, or even, really, how we fare. We are left mostly on our own with little leadership or accountability from faculty or program staff.

And so, my friends and I wander the dirt-road gullies of Old Delhi and the wide, paved thoroughfares of New Delhi with neither context nor connection. We are treated with curiosity and kindness

from local people just as easily as we are swindled and duped. The rundown parts of the city that harbor refugee tents and makeshift tin dwellings feel different than the high-rise buildings that house the middle and upper classes. I don't know though, how to name or process the feelings that arise as I navigate the different neighborhoods. Why do I feel so awkward and guilty in the first setting, and awash with relief in the second? We do not talk about the big ideas that I and other classmates sift through—of class, poverty, being who we are in the world, noticing inequalities, and having more or having less than other people. Compared to the many local people we see and interact with, my classmates and I are all privileged Americans. Based on our particular identities, however, we are privileged and less-privileged in different ways. We aren't adept at initiating conversation on sensitive and weighty topics. Instead, we meander our way through the country uneasily, our questions and feelings about ourselves and the world silently simmering under the surface.

One of my classmates, who I'll call Ajay, is like me, an Indian American: family from India, he was raised in the United States. I think of him as somewhat unpredictable. Ajay isn't what you'd call "comfortable in his skin," and his hyphenated American-and-Indian identity seems to cause him great angst, especially now that he is smack dab in the motherland. I hear him continuously badmouth India to mollify his American self. "This place is so dirty," he says, "and smelly. And poor. It's disorganized. And too crowded." Sometimes he seems so sad and bitter. "I can't wait to go back home to a clean and civilized country. I'm so glad my parents fled this godforsaken land!" His anger—which seems more like shame at being forever associated with a place he had been told was considered soiled and crooked—preoccupies him continuously. Ajay's rants scare me, for while I too am figuring out how to be who I am between the United States and India, I don't want to be filled with negativity. I wonder to myself, should I act like him? Or might there be a less-condemning path to follow?

Another classmate I'll call Aaron spends the first few months of the program enthusiastic and bubbly. "Wow!" is his favorite go-to expression, applicable for all experiences. "Wow, the food!" "Wow, the women!" "Wow, the traffic!" "Wow, the colors!" During our class sessions on Indian civilization and society, taught by renowned Delhi University faculty, he always participates and asks insightful questions. Sometime midway in the year though, Aaron's enthusiasm peters out. He admits that being in India has unleashed a deep sense of historical remorse at not knowing enough about his own European immigrant roots. I remember him lamenting, "For twenty years I've been known as just a white guy in the United States. But all this history and culture here in India makes me want to have a history and culture too. My people must have had traditions and culture from our homeland, right?" He cries a lot those days, shoulders shrunk with sadness and regret. He eventually decides to leave the program to return home and initiate research about his white ethnic ancestry. Relinquishing a chunk of his program fees, within a few weeks, Aaron is back in the United States. A mutual friend tells me later that he returned a much heavier spirit, brooding and blue, quite changed from his earlier bubbly self.

Another classmate, a friendly and tall white woman I'll call Melody, finds herself the center of Indian male attention. According to her, wherever she goes young men stare at her with interest. She imagines that everyone wants to bed her. Some didn't, but I'm sure many did. She enjoys being pursued and wiggles her hips for her onlookers. "I'm always in the spotlight," she states, her finger twirling her shoulder-length hair. She giggles and tells us about her latest pick-up. The other students on our program and I listen to her sexy stories simultaneously incredulous at the attention she receives, and thoroughly jealous that we ourselves are clearly not so captivating. "The boys here are so nice to me," she says. And here she sighs. "Travel is wonderful. I love traveling. And I just looove Indian culture." As long as young Indian

men ogle her, Melody enjoys India. When “the boys” do not give her the attention to which she’s become accustomed, she falls into a terrible funk of culture shock, homesickness, and self-doubt.

I too am trying to make sense of my own identity. I spend much of my time quaking and hoping that people won’t notice how



unsettled I feel. One night I go to a party with an incredible group of smart and worldly Delhi University students, where, haunted by all the times others have indicated, “you don’t belong,” I get caught up in my own head. I spend the evening an awkward wallflower, too nervous to speak and reveal the shame of being not-quite-Indian-enough and not-the-right-kind-of-American. Some version of this party dynamic repeats throughout my year and a half abroad: an excellent opportunity in front of me, and me plastered to the sidelines as the non-participant

wallflower on account of the noise in my head that I do not know how to quell or quieten.

My time abroad also catalyzes numerous questions about what I observe and experience. Though I don’t badmouth India too much like my classmate Ajay, I do wonder why India is so different than the United States. Public facilities like bathrooms in India are missing, or if present, scant and dirty. This contrasts greatly with the public facilities I have learned to take for granted in the United States. I knew a bit about the history of colonialism, but never quite grasped what made some countries rich and some countries poor. I ask myself if the lack of public amenities in India relates to a colonial past, or something else? How does this relate to the poverty, the tents, and tin

shacks peppering the city? I think about Lakshmi, the daughter of my grandparents’ domestic maid I knew as a child when I visited India, and feel guilty and bad. Lakshmi and I played together as children, though at some point, I learned to let her sweep and swab the rooms while I leisurely read comic books on the black vinyl sofa. How had I somewhat easily learned that she—along with her lower-caste identity, poorer social status, her labor—was there to support my upper-caste comfort? I see myself and my relative wealth implicated in the poverty all around me, but can’t understand my feelings or what I am to do about it.

Likewise, I can’t understand why Aaron feels bad about not knowing more about his white ancestry. The white children who tormented me throughout my youth seemed to get such a payoff from that very history. They felt they were better than me, and they proved it by their cocky attitude and unchecked behavior. Yet here was my good friend, sad and belittled because he doesn’t know enough about himself and his ancestry. Is this the same phenomenon, or something different, I wonder.

I also think often about gender and sexuality during my time in India that year, about what it means to be a young woman in mostly male public space, and why I feel I have to cover my chest with scarves to seem modest and acceptable. I can’t understand why I feel judgmental toward Melody’s romantic liaisons. Everywhere we go together, she receives attention, and I do not. Is this because she is white? Or prettier than me? Both? Certainly, I feel inferior and envious. Perhaps, though, my feelings also have to do with the ways that her skin color marks her in different ways in India, but in seemingly better ways than my own skin color had marked me in the United States. Skin color is just skin color, I remember thinking. But no, some skin colors seem more desirable both in India and the United States. Why, I ask myself? Who made this so? How has it come to be that it is easier to be white both in the United States as well as in India? How does history inform our present in seemingly inescapable ways?

With no skills to speak aloud my questions and no formal classroom space to work them out, I try to be cool—liquid cool—and appear totally under control. To pull that off, I can't go very deep in conversations and need to stay on the surface of my emotions. My anxieties eventually do burst, like a pressure cooker gone rogue. I do not know how to be okay with the splattered mess of guilt and anxiety, so I panic and sprint out of my classmates' sight. Like a small animal in the presence of an approaching predator, I run this way and that, looking out for myself, fear and self-preservation coursing through my blood. I stay still, stay a wallflower, read a lot, and prefer to blend into the shrubbery than risk being seen.

Conversations That Can Happen

Nowadays, as I lead my own students abroad and consult with a range of programs, I feel heartbroken for the opportunities lost to us as a group so many years ago. It seems like such a shame that we had little scope to discuss any of the broader identity, difference, and power issues that clearly we all were struggling with, less to neatly solve them, and more to just acknowledge them as real. Perhaps I could have peeked out of my self-imposed refuge to participate in more conversations and experiences exactly as I was, not wishing I might magically change into someone else one lucky day. Among my peers I was often a wallflower but I did create a few friendships with local people, mostly people a generation older than me. These friendships allowed me a chance to bloom and grow. Among my peer group, though, I remained tentative without an outlet to process these feelings.

My peers also might have benefited from some honest and careful conversation about the issues they too seemed to be working through. I wonder if my Indian American classmate Ajay could have had a chance to reflect on the embarrassment he so clearly felt about

being who he was if given the opportunity to explore what growing up different and brown in the United States in a sea of middle-class white meant to him. Perhaps he could have been guided to reflect on how that foundation shaped him, his shame of being himself, the costs of assimilation, and how he saw "the motherland" as flawed. In giving him opportunities to share and unburden, could we have perhaps lightened his load and ire toward his skin, his parents, and India itself?

I think about Aaron, whose lack of knowledge about his ancestry flooded him with a longing for a culture of his own. With some careful and sensitive talk, we could have spoken about the longer history of whiteness in the United States and the process through which immigrants from Europe and other light-skinned migrants were encouraged to leave behind their culture, assimilate, and become this-race-called-white. His not knowing his culture wasn't the fault of his family, but rather had to do with the broader history of immigration to the New World and how power was consolidated and deployed. I wonder what knowing this could have meant for his sense and search for self.

And for Melody, who felt that she was so warmly welcomed into the arms of Indian men, some frank talk about gender, sexuality, and race in an international context might have helped us all think about our identities in a more complex way. Though both Aaron and Melody were working through what being white abroad meant for each of them, Melody's journey as a white woman was gendered so differently than Aaron's as a white man. Perhaps we could have spoken about the troublesome associations related to white women abroad, that they are somehow emblematic of what is said to be the more developed and sexually liberated Western world, assumed to be available in a way that Indian women are assumed not to be. Of course, these were stereotypes, not applicable across the board. But if we had acknowledged and said aloud these underlying ideas—and made it less about us as individuals and more as an example of complex historical social phenomena—I wonder if all of us could have been supported to explore

our feelings as white people and people of color abroad. We were all, of course, globally privileged women and men from what we were often told was “the best country in the world,” in a majority brown country with strong patriarchal codes. And yet, we were finding, even within our small group, the different configurations that race made up when combined with gender and sexuality.

To spin these conversations constructively, we’d have needed trust, time, and tenacity as a group. We could have spared ourselves a great deal of angst if we had known that our emotional ups and downs weren’t merely the result of our own flaws or shortcomings, but rather indicative of the complex global inequalities and geopolitical issues that many of us navigate when we travel. Like most programs peopled with Westerners who travel to the developing world, we did not have a faculty member, group leader, or program staff member who could facilitate the tricky and sensitive conversations we so desperately needed. On our own, we certainly did not know how to begin such honest talk. While we benefited greatly from the expertise of local Indian scholars who would guest-lecture our classes, we needed a person—or even a resource we could use—to help us think about issues of identity, race, culture, class, sexuality, and gender—and how



these concepts intersect with history, power, privilege, and justice. Knowing that we weren’t alone in our thoughts could have helped us find more grace and empathy for each other, and certainly for ourselves. These conversations wouldn’t have solved all our issues, but they would have helped us navigate our travels with less disconnect and more understanding.

Good Intentions and Do-Good Travel

Even now, more than twenty-five years since my classmates and I bumbled our way through our study abroad experience, most programs that send Westerners abroad rarely bring up—let alone honestly discuss—the kinds of identity experiences and emotional challenges that global travel sometimes glaringly brings to the surface. This matters greatly, for more young Westerners are venturing abroad than ever before. People from the West are meandering all over the planet to study, fix, heal, teach, build things, ally with and help others. In many ways, this makes good sense, as travel can broaden our horizons and provide perspective. There’s really no other experience like hauling our body, head, and heart to another part of the planet to smell, taste, touch, hear, and see our amazing world. When we notice that some people might not have the same access and rights that other people take for granted, we may feel stirred to act. “I see that the world is unequal and too difficult for too many people,” we may think, “and I want to help.” Do-good travel hopes to catalyze well-intentioned sentiment into real-life solutions for the people who need them most. The many varieties of do-good travel include global health, medical missions, social impact cruises, development programs, alternative spring break, and voluntourism programs.

While there are differences in how each of these programs is conceptualized and run, most transport people of the Global North into resource-poor locations of the Global South. Sometimes, do-good travel can be aimed at resource-poor places in the Global North as well—for example, public health programs, service-learning opportunities, and educational pipeline programs. Some programs last a week or two, others for much longer. With such a variety of do-good travel opportunities from which to choose, the world as a destination is closer and easier to reach than ever before. Such programs are only growing in scope and number, offering more Westerners the chance

to become “global citizens” and, as one advertisement puts it, to “see the world while making a difference.”

Unfortunately, though, too many do-good travelers do not have the benefit of rich and critical conversations on many important issues, including the politics of our travels, how our identities give meaning to our lives, how our differences and similarities might resonate in a larger context, if good intentions are good for everyone, and what “help” means for whom in which context. As travel writer Bani Amor writes in their essay, “Getting Real about Decolonizing Travel Culture,” thinking critically about travel of all kinds serves as “a vehicle for which to explore the condition of living, how our relationships to place shape us and our experiences, how our identities and political histories inform place, how power structures inform how we migrate (or don’t) and how that affects the places we pass through.” How we think of our journeys abroad matters greatly, as does our critical engagement with our home communities.

To approach our travel opportunities with critical awareness and reflection, we’ll have to slow down our revved up desire to go and instead, first consider some big issues. We’ll need to think more carefully about the broader ethics of identity, difference, and the global dynamics of power that have made it so that hundreds and thousands of Westerners jet-set around the globe to Ghana, Nicaragua, or Haiti to help, heal, and remedy what needs to be fixed, while hundreds and thousands of Ghanaians, Nicaraguans, or Haitians are similarly *not* coming to our countries to do the same. Rethinking travel in an unequal world gives us the tools to approach these big discussions with more humility and awareness. In the process, we strive to develop a more ethical and accountable backbone from which to act, both at home and abroad.

CHAPTER 2

Luggage We Take with Us: *Difference and Advantage*

Differences Nearby

ACCORDING TO THE DIVERSITIES AND DISPARITIES PROJECT, MOST people in the United States live in residentially segregated communities that are not well integrated. The average white person, for example, continues to live in a neighborhood that is very different racially from those neighborhoods where the average Black, Hispanic, or Asian person lives. In metropolitan America, the average white person lives in a neighborhood that is 75 percent white. A typical African American lives in a neighborhood that is 65 percent Black, Hispanic and Asian and only 35 percent white. As these numbers suggest, just by living their lives in their own communities, true integration and diversity are experienced very differently in the daily lives of whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians.

Given these realities, sometimes I speculate how it’s even possible to know one another with deep honesty, trust, and openness across