

De-constructing the Cosmopolitan Gaze

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Abstract

Introduction: Nurturing effective intercultural dialogue through tourism has been positioned to be an emergent challenge to tourism professionals working toward sustainability in a globalised world (Robinson and Picard 2006). This interdisciplinary study devises inroads into ways of addressing this challenge through 'reading' the language of cosmopolitanism as it appears in writings about tourism and travel. When one writes about travel a journey into the cosmos is documented which is a socio-cultural imagining of self and other. These writings can be highly influential on the reading (and potentially travelling) public and they are positioned as informing the development of global citizenry literacy. As cultural texts they recount an engagement in, and with, cosmopolitanism by way of a cosmopolitical gaze. This paper is drawn from a wider study which examines linkages between cosmopolitanism and cultural literacy by formulating a conceptual framework to 'read' cultural orientations through discourse and ideology. The study examines women's travel writing to Iran in a specific time period: between 1979 (the Islamic Revolution) and 2002 (President Bush's State of the Union address that positioned Iran in the 'Axis of Evil'). This timeframe marks a period of uncertainty – a liminal period marred by crisis which gave rise to negative discursive frameworks that have been 'normalised' in Western cultural thought. Key discourses are identified by discerning patterns of convention in the ways the authors frame their narrative and position the foreign within this framework.

Method: This study adopts a poststructuralist, social constructivist research design which views travel and the travel text as sign, discourse and representation. The study draws from texts set within a chronological frame and uses the cultural studies lens of liminality to examine data. Liminality provides a way to explore the language of cosmopolitanism in that it has the potential to cast light on the cosmopolitical by revealing how the self and 'other' are imagined. This method positions 'reality' as socially constructed and studies discourse in historical and cosmopolitical contexts. Elements of a feminist paradigm are incorporated through its concern about relationships of gender and power. Scapes and scripts are used as conceptual tools to explore how imaginings of self and other are constructed in the travel text.

Findings: The findings identified key discourses by discerning patterns of convention in the various ways these authors frame themselves 'in the world' and how they position the foreign within this framework. These travellers were found to engage with place in ways that were oriented by Western viewing positions which form a rubric of discourses that positioned self, place and 'other'. While all authors evoked values espoused in liberal democracy, these narratives are ethnocentric and reveal an element of rigidity in liberal democracy in that they cast judgement over the foreign from a position of 'security' and legitimate the voice through discourses of Western privilege and choice which appear as dimensions of Western internationalism as a narrow form of cosmopolitanism. Concerns are raised in relation to the rigidity of Western discourses because they impact on fostering improved intercultural relationships and, by extension, sustainable tourism practices.

Application of Results: This paper de-constructs the cosmopolitan gaze to forward a plan for devising a conceptual framework that can be used to 'map' culture by forwarding the idea that a cosmopolitical rubric (made up of discourses that commonly appear within cultural groups) would assist in defining the gaze from any cultural viewing position. The qualitative research method used in this study could also be applied to other forms of writings about travel and tourism to understand how other people and places are positioned to discern shifts in ways of thinking about authenticity of the foreign. This conceptual 'tool' could be useful to tourism planners, educators and other professionals as well as tourism media to understand how polemic positions are shaped and cultures are stigmatised through discourse. Awareness of how discourse operates in travel/tourism is crucial to understanding intercultural relationships as they impact on sustainable tourism practices.

Conclusion: These authors were found to mobilise notions of liminality and authenticity as discursive tools to provide authority to the voice, ground discourse and structure the gaze. The cosmopolitan gaze was found to be selective in its focus by drawing from widely held 'legitimate' Western discourse to construct 'other' by falling back on preconceived ideas of the foreign. The discussion raises timely and topical issues which address intercultural relationships between Western and Southwest Asian cultures in the context of tourism and travel. The paper addresses the scholarly conundrum of theorising cosmopolitanism and contributes in a useful way by forwarding a conceptual framework that can be applied to further understand the concept and the dynamics that characterise cultural exchange. In this way it contributes to tourism scholarship by focussing on issues which are immediate to questions which surround sustainable tourism.