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From travellers to activist global citizens? Practitioner reflections on an activist/volunteer tourist project

Sameena Dalwai and Brendan Donegan

Abstract:

Where their parents sought an essentially passive observation of the exotic while 'roughing it' on foot and in sleeper class, a new generation of young travellers from the global North seek authentic experience in the global South through opportunities to actively engage with the realities of poverty-stricken slums as volunteer tourists. Free of their conventional social ties and uninhibited in their attempts to carve out new global citizen roles for themselves, the youths experience a bonding 'communitas' with each other, and when they return home their social status is raised in the eyes of employers and peers. This paper focuses on the Development and Human Rights Institute (DHRI), one of many youth travel organisations that have sprung up to meet this new market, an organisation both authors have been involved in establishing and running since 2006. One of the primary motivations for the small team that set up the organisation was to capitalise on the liminal moment experienced by travellers in order to provoke them into fresh, critical and politicised reflections on the relationships between North and South and the place of their volunteerism within those relationships. The paper discusses our observations of the preconceptions of our participants, their experiences in India, and the attempts of the team to encourage the participants to reflect critically. The paper aims at polyvocality, resisting the temptation to hide the dissensus between the two authors' positions *vis-à-vis* the success, failure and potential of the project. While Brendan's analysis leads him to a comparison of DHRI with Paulo Freire's ideas of critical pedagogy, Sameena provides an analysis of how structures of racism and global capitalism shape the practices of volunteer tourists from the global North working for development in the South.

Key words: Liminality, communitas, structuralism, activism, critical pedagogy, postcolonialism, polyvocality, volunteering, youth travel, development.

Introduction

Where their parents sought an essentially passive observation of the exotic while 'roughing it' on foot and in sleeper class, a new generation of young travellers from the global North seek authentic experience in the global South through opportunities to actively engage with the realities of poverty-stricken slums as volunteer tourists. Free of their conventional social ties and uninhibited in their attempts to carve out new global citizen roles for themselves, the youths experience a bonding

'communitas' with each other, and when they return home their social status is raised in the eyes of employers and peers.

This paper offers an analysis of the Development and Human Rights Institute (DHRI), an activist project that both authors have been involved with. DHRI offered an annual programme open to youths from the global North, providing them the opportunity to learn about development issues and to participate in the practical application of development philosophies through hands-on experience in real development work in India. As we understood it, DHRI's strength *vis-à-vis* other programmes was the way in which it tried to bring together theory and practice. The DHRI programme had two components: a two-week summer school comprising seminars and networking with academics, activists and individuals working for social justice in India, and a six-week internship with an organisation where participants would be exposed to a range of perspectives and experiences of doing such work in India. As we will explain in this article, we believed we could capitalise on the liminal moment experienced by Western youths travelling to India for the first time, in order to provoke them into fresh, critical and politicised reflections on the relationships between North and South and the place of their volunteerism within those relationships.

DHRI had the following objectives:

- Provide an avenue for students to gain field experience to further their own professional development as well as help strengthen human rights organisations in India;
- Create support and solidarity for issues in India in the western world, and encourage young academics and activists to incorporate a greater concern for challenges facing India in their future work;
- Enable friendships and partnerships among young activists across borders as well as encourage exchange of ideas and experiences;
- Encourage participants to carry home the experiences and lessons from India and become part of social justice initiatives worldwide;

- Stimulate civil society pressure groups and networks worldwide to advocate for progressive international development policy (<http://www.dhri.org/why.htm>).

The first point we should make, then, is that this article is not the product of a research project; rather it is a product of an action project. DHRI is our 'baby.' Sameena envisioned the project, recruited the team and put it into action, taking primary responsibility. Apart from being a member of the DHRI team, Brendan's experiences as a British youth travelling and volunteering in India inspired the shape that DHRI took. At the time of writing this article both of us are PhD students working on topics that bear little relation to tourism, but we decided to write a paper for the Liminal Landscapes conference and this journal issue because we recognised that doing so represented a valuable opportunity for us to reflect on DHRI academically and from a distance.ⁱ In pursuing this goal we have found ourselves walking a line between academia and activism that often seems to put conflicting demands on our writing. In order to remain true to our activist inclinations we have sometimes found it necessary to either leave certain theoretical points underdeveloped and implicit within the text of this article, or to use endnotes to indicate how such points could be developed further.ⁱⁱ

As two members of the DHRI team, we do not see the same thing when we look at DHRI and its possible futures. In order to bring this lack of consensus into the paper and make use of it analytically, we present the paper using an explicit construct of polyvocality (Thody 2006: 128) in which we jointly 'present' our arguments by speaking in turn.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus while the introduction and first two sections of the paper see us speaking with one voice to reflect on DHRI using Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas*, in the third section Brendan offers an argument for how DHRI might be 'reformed' in order to better meet its objectives, and in the fourth section Sameena offers an argument for how DHRI is essentially flawed and ultimately unworthy of the time and resources the DHRI team has put into it. In a fifth section we once again speak with one voice in order to summarise the paper's arguments and reflect on how our use of polyvocality helps illuminate and illustrate our

arguments about North-South relations, given that one of us comes from the global South and the other is from the global North.

In this article we use the concept of liminality to think through both what we were trying to achieve with DHRI and what happened in practice. Our aspirations and experiences resonate with some of the ways this concept has been developed by Victor Turner (1974, 1994; Turner and Turner 1978) and within the field of Tourism Studies (Shields 1991; Graburn 2001 [2004]). In this article we theorise the DHRI programme as an attempt to exploit the ludic liminal moment in order to forcefully draw the attention of DHRI participants to the nightmarish spectres of exploitation that linger at the margins of that moment, and to prompt them to a reflexive, politicised social action. In the sections of this paper in which we distinguish between our authorial voices, Brendan supplements the concept of liminality with Paulo Freire's (1996) writings on critical pedagogy, while Sameena turns to ideas of postcoloniality with particular reference to *The Empire Strikes Back* (1992), a landmark collection by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. By drawing these other elements into the analysis, we ultimately push the concept of liminality beyond the structuralist framework in which Turner developed it and into a post-structuralist space, arguing in the final section of the paper that while liminality is useful for understanding DHRI, structuralism is not.

Expectations of Liminality

In its contemporary usage among social scientists, the concept of liminality can be traced to the work of Van Gennep (1960) on the analysis of ritual. Van Gennep's interest was in how "ancient and tribal societies conceptualised and symbolised the transitions men have to make between well-defined states and statuses, if they are to grow up to accommodate themselves to unprecedented, even antithetical conditions" (Turner and Turner 1978: 2). He argued that all *rites de passage* (rites of transition) are marked by three phases: separation (involving micro-rituals symbolising the detachment of the individual or group that is the ritual subject from a stable position in the social structure), limen or margin, and aggregation (in which the transition is completed and the ritual subject returns to the social structure but in a

new position) (Turner and Turner 1978: 2). Building on the work of Hubert and Mauss (1898), Van Gennep was interested in the idea that the middle, liminal phase involves a temporary break with or loosening of the social structures of ordinary, everyday life in which the status of the ritual subject remains ambiguous, “betwixt and between all familiar lines of classification” (Turner and Turner 1978: 2). Through a series of works (1974, 1994; Turner and Turner 1978) Victor Turner developed the concept of liminality, arguing that liminality should be

seen to apply to all phases of decisive cultural change, in which previous orderings of thought and behaviour are subject to revision and criticism, when hitherto unprecedented modes of ordering relations between ideas and people become possible and desirable...It has become clear to us that liminality is not only *transition* but also *potentiality*... (Turner and Turner 1978: 2-3, emphasis in original)

A number of scholars have drawn out the implications of liminality for the study of tourism. Graburn (2001 [2004]) argues that tourism can be understood as a ‘secular ritual,’ emphasising the ways in which “the special occasions of leisure and travel stand in opposition to everyday life at home and work” (2001 [2004]: 23); Shields (1991) argues that in the early 1800s going on honeymoon to Niagara Falls, the ‘honeymoon capital of the world,’ involved a pilgrimage, a move into a liminal zone where “the strict social conventions of bourgeois families were relaxed under the exigencies of travel and of relative anonymity and freedom from collective scrutiny” (Urry 1990: 10). However, these analyses downplay Van Gennep’s concern with transition; Graburn, for example, notes that “most tourists on their seasonal and annual vacations want to enjoy their own chosen pursuits and come back refreshed as better versions of their same old selves” (Graburn 2001 [2004]: 33).

In contrast, recent scholarship on ‘gap year’ and ‘adventure’ travel in the global South by youths from the North has emphasised the increasing association of such travel with personal growth, the accruing of cultural and corporate capital that will facilitate the traveller’s re-entry into competitive social and labour markets ‘back home’ (Simpson 2004, 2005a, 2005b). Gap year travel is expected to lead to

personal growth through encounters with exotic societies governed by different and perhaps unrecognisable social structures; exposure to and overcoming of risks and dangers ranging from civil war and terrorism to malaria and gastroenteritis; and, in the case of volunteer tourism, the possibility of assuming the position of expert in spite of a lack of qualifications, thus providing “spaces in which participants can experiment with possible future professional identities” (Simpson 2005a: 465). In this way, ‘gap year’ adventures in the global South can be seen as playing an important social role as *rites de passage* for contemporary Northern youth. Such travel separates youths from the social structure in which they grew up, takes them out of the set of social rules they have always assumed to be ‘just the way things are,’ and returns them to that structure changed, as adults.

Central to the liminal aspect of gap year travel is the moment of encounter with the other. Brendan travelled to India for the first time in summer 2005. In an email to family and friends back home in the UK he wrote that

A lot of my experiences in my first week in India reminded me of the way that babies interact with the world: initially they don't understand anything, they just look around at everything with wide eyes trying to take it all in, and everything to them is just images, colours and shapes with no meaning, until the third or fourth time they see them, when patterns begin to emerge and they begin to make some sense of their surroundings.

(Donegan 2005)

Truly enough he was wide eyed about everything, from the garbage trucks on the roads in Mumbai to cockroaches in the kitchen. He had arrived into India with no idea of what he would find there, his head nonetheless filled with TV images of elephants, colourful saris, dust, garbage and street children. Without being able to identify it as such, what Brendan’s email home seemed to capture was the encounter with a new social structure that, because it was unrecognisable, could be understood as akin to what Turner called the ‘anti-structure’ of the liminal space. Brendan experienced this encounter as a challenge: he ended the email by commenting that “I love the way India makes me use my brain, because it is so demanding but in a

totally different way to the way my studies at Warwick were demanding; this is learning, and learning at a very fast rate, but it is a different kind of learning” (Donegan 2005).

As with other forms of tourism, gap year travel relies upon and produces “a clear distinction between the familiar and the faraway” (Urry 1990: 11), a distinction that leads the traveller into the project of comparison. Travellers – like anthropologists – are always on the look-out for that which is different in the new culture, and eager to construct their own explanations for these differences (Errington and Gewertz 1989 [2004]).^{iv} They piece together explanations from scraps of information disembedded from the cultural knowledge of the native. The confidence and speed with which this theory-building begins to take place is remarkable. For example, when some of Brendan’s friends visited him in India during his PhD fieldwork, one started theorising after glimpsing Mumbai’s slums on the first day and visiting a village school on the second. He constructed a narrative in which those who left the village for the city went to a better life, initially obtaining a low-cost foothold among expensive real estate by staying in the slums. If they had studied well in the village school, this friend hypothesised, their initial stay in the slums would be temporary, as they would find a better-paid job and improve their position in the city. His was a hopeful, *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle 2008) account of how India’s poor might overcome their poverty, on the basis of two days in India. On the basis of years of social work, in this village and in the slums of Pune, the Indian friend who facilitated the visit to the school suggested that this conflict-free narrative of social mobility is a gross simplification; while poor villagers do move to the city it is highly unlikely they will make it out of the slums once they enter.

In her analysis of the discursive strategies of the gap year industry, Kate Simpson sees in the tendency to summarise “entire nations of people in simple pairs of descriptors” a “process of essentialising others” that “serves the purpose of creating simple, recognisable categories through which such others can become ‘known’” (2005a: 457). The same can be said of the travellers themselves, but Western youths returning from their travels do not merely repeat the binary oppositions of the

gap year industry's discourse. Crucially, they flesh out their theories with their own anecdotes, fecund with the "authoritative power granted to knowledge produced through the supposed authenticity of first-hand travel experiences" (Simpson 2005a: 466). Their anecdotes are based on their own observations, or are prefaced with 'My Indian friend told me that in India...'

It was on the basis of our experience of travellers such as Brendan and his friends that the DHRI team came to the conclusion that many travellers appear to know little or nothing more than common Northern stereotypes of Southern countries before coming to India, and depending on who they meet and speak to, it is possible that they may know little or nothing more than common *Indian* stereotypes of India when they leave. This conclusion is one shared by a number of scholars working on gap year travel. Simpson (2005b) writes that "despite the many claims made about the educational value of a gap year, across the industry...[t]he dominant discourse appears to be one in which education is merely an inevitable outcome of experience" (2005b: 17), and argues elsewhere that "[t]he assumption that contact alone breaks down stereotypes directly contradicts research suggesting that far from challenging pre-held views, contact experiences may in fact accentuate deep-seated attitudes" (Simpson 2005a: 462).^v

The rationale for DHRI as an activist project grew out of this starting point. Our political vision might be (fairly reductively) labelled as Marxist, Feminist and Postcolonial, and the summer school had a fair dose of these elements along with influences from the anti-caste movement in India. Our team consisted of young scholars and activists, most of us Indian or Indian-origin. The idea of DHRI was to counter the popular Northern narratives and experiences of 'India'. We wanted to show the idealist youngsters from Northern universities the India that fights back, the India that shines through movements, struggles and *morchas* (protests). In the process we came to see how we were idealist too, and our own DHRI experiences opened our eyes to the world.

Communitas, its absence, and antagonism

A second concept Turner used in his discussion of liminality was *communitas*, a spontaneous bonding and community experienced by individuals in the liminal state and the “perception of unmediated encounters with other individuals also momentarily stripped of their social status” (Shields 1991: 89). Even before arriving in India, each batch of 20-30 participants started communicating with each other using Facebook, making the most of the opportunity to compare notes, to share expectations and elements of preparation. Meeting each other face-to-face in the summer school the participants got to know each other quickly – but in the limited way of travellers. Conversations tended to focus on the present, on the common activities and experiences they were sharing and responding to in similar ways.

For Turner, liminal spaces are characterised by *communitas* emerging between individuals going through a similar experience, and this was the case in the DHRI programme. But *communitas* did not emerge between the DHRI participants and the DHRI team. Turner’s framework offers one reason for this: participants were not going through the same experience as DHRI team members, who were (and presented themselves as being) ‘experienced.’ As a result the relationships between participants and team members were more akin to the relationship between tourist and tourist guide. The participants were together in a liminal space; they had escaped the confines of their social structure. On the other hand, the DHRI members were very much in their social structure as they went about the task of introducing their social structure to the participants.

Other reasons this *communitas* failed to emerge can be found in the structure of the DHRI programme. Perhaps most important was the commodification of the product offered by the DHRI team. DHRI participants paid fees of £350 to DHRI in the expectation of receiving a particular type of experience from the DHRI team, and through this transaction the participants became our consumers and customers rather than our comrades; our relationship became professionalised.

We had not anticipated this outcome. We did not set up DHRI to make money; ours was an entirely voluntary effort. Our expenses were covered, but we kept these and

the administrative costs very low – we ran the organisation in a spendthrift manner just as we ran our lives as students and activists. DHRI was set up as an activist project that was also financially sustainable, and while the source of its revenue stream was one of its strengths (i.e. no funding agencies to appease), it was also an obstacle limiting our ability to achieve the effect we wanted to achieve. In a sense we had the worst of both worlds: we were offering a product but not benefiting from it financially. We viewed ourselves as activists and the participants as activists or potential activists, and we wanted them to behave with us accordingly. The participants saw their relationship with the DHRI team as built around a commodity, and they wanted us to be professional in our relationship with them.^{vi}

The failure of *communitas* to emerge between the participants and DHRI team was also a product of the summer school structure. In 2007 the format of the summer school was based very much on an educational style dominant in Indian universities: lectures, delivered by Indian speakers invited by the DHRI team, with opportunities for dialogue between the speaker and the participants minimal and strictly taking place after each lecture. The demarcation of roles was unambiguous: the participants were there to learn, and the speakers were there to ‘pour’ information into the participants. In later years we reorganised the summer school to include more ‘participatory’ elements (see below), but these were extremely structured and to a large extent maintained the role demarcation.

Finally, our political vision and the analytical framework we offered participants militated against a sense of solidarity. In a group discussion at the end of the 2008 summer school we asked participants to share answers to the following questions: Why am I here? Why is DHRI here? One participant said:

I don't know why I am here. I'm confused. I came here because I wanted to do voluntary work. But throughout the summer school we have been told that there are massive problems with people from the West coming to India to help. So now what am I supposed to do?^{vii}

At the heart of this confusion lay a question: if this group of Indians had a problem with Northerners coming to their country to help, why had they set up an organisation with precisely this target audience? Ironically, part of the reason this question emerged by the end of the summer school was that our participants were starting to do what we wanted them to do: to question and to critique. What we had not anticipated was that the target of their critique would be us. But perhaps it was actually quite predictable that the participants might move from a sense of *communitas* to a sense of comradeship that developed among the participants *against* the DHRI team, the DHRI team becoming an identifiable collective enemy 'Other' against whom the DHRI participants unified. Why? Because there was a mutual failure to meet expectations.

This discussion shows that there is a sense in which the DHRI team and DHRI participants had very different expectations of the programme, and that Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas* are useful tools for understanding the reasons for these differences and what happened in the programme. In the following section Brendan draws upon the concept of liminality to explore some ways the programme might be modified in response to this analysis.

A programme for reform: Brendan Donegan

In this section I identify two problems arising within the DHRI programme and suggest solutions that do not involve terminating the programme completely.

In a group discussion at the end of the 2008 summer school we asked participants to share answers to the following question: What can East and West learn from each other? To our surprise and horror, the group talked at length about things they felt India could learn from Europe – law and order, technology, civic discipline (for example the art of queuing) – but did not even entertain the possibility that Europe could learn anything from India.

With hindsight I think we should not have been surprised. The summer school content focused exclusively on development and human rights issues in India. The

participants were youths coming from Northern countries, very few of whom had previous substantive engagement with the problems of their own society. In this context, it seems plausible to suggest that the content of the summer school actually *reinforced* their ideas of India as a primitive, unjust, underdeveloped society, and themselves as enlightened people coming from a developed society where there are no problems. In other words, we may have in fact reinforced their 'missionary syndrome'.

A solution to this problem might be to introduce three modifications to the content of the summer school. First, incorporate discussions of social problems in Northern countries. Second, emphasise a refusal of the idea that the world is made up of developed and developing countries, pointing out that all societies have social problems and contain both developed and developing worlds within them. Third, emphasise the comparative anthropologist's observation that societies are based on very different principles, and that each society offers some way of organising society that other societies might learn from.

During the 2008 summer school I asked some of the participants for informal feedback. "It's a bit too much like university," one offered. "We really liked the field trips to villages and organisations during the second week – perhaps there could be more field trips, and during the first week?" said another. At the time, some members of the DHRI team were annoyed by these comments, taking them as an indication of a lack of commitment to learning. With hindsight, however, I would argue that these comments suggest that the problem may have been that the summer school structure worked *against* liminality. Travelling to India, DHRI participants expected an encounter with the exotic and the unknown. Instead, what they encountered was a set of structured learning activities recognisable as almost identical to those of Northern universities – the environment they had just left. Expecting the opportunity to explore a mysterious and alien new society, they encountered attempts to put it into order analytically before they had even had the joy of being thrust into a new environment with rules that cannot be grasped immediately and must instead be

gradually deciphered. Thus in seeking to exploit the liminal moment the summer school destroyed it, and in so doing made the rebellion of the participants inevitable.

A solution might be found in the critical pedagogy advocated by Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996), Freire writes that

The starting point for organising the programme content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people. Utilising certain basic contradictions, we must pose this existential, concrete, present situation to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response – not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action.
(Freire 1996: 76-7)

If we take Freire's approach seriously then there are many ways the summer school structure might be improved. As a minimum, the summer school's lectures must be interspersed with more field trips that allow DHRI participants to see some parts of the country the lectures are trying to teach them about. What might be a better approach would be to replace the lectures more or less entirely with facilitated discussions, giving participants the chance to theorise and make sense of what they are seeing, but all the while steering them towards a way of 'making sense' that provokes them to respond "at the level of action."

Why we cannot continue DHRI: Sameena Dalwai

In order to show why Brendan and I come to different conclusions about DHRI it is necessary for me to return to some of the points made earlier in the paper and take them in a slightly different direction.

In the discussion of *communitas* in the second section of the paper, we noted that we expected DHRI participants to be fellow activists and that in practice they were more like customers buying a product we were selling. I would suggest that one reason for this becomes evident if we look at DHRI as part of the industry of 'volunteer tourism'. Simpson (2005a) suggests that each year an estimated 200,000

British people aged 18–25 take a gap year (2005a: 447). This is “no longer a sub-set of the tourist industry pursued by a disparate minority of young people”; it is an industry with “mass participation, and popular scrutiny” (2005a: 447-8). In a labour market that is becoming more and more competitive, gap years are increasingly viewed in terms of the “opportunities they offer to enhance one’s access to both social spaces and employment”, and in this context attributes such as ‘broadened horizons,’^{viii} ‘personal development’ and ‘leadership and teamwork skills’ are marketed and sold to potential participants (Simpson 2005a: 450). With our capacity limited to 20-30 participants per year, DHRI is a tiny player in this market. We expect activists, but what we get is our share of the 10 000 young people who go to the so-called ‘Third World’ every year from the UK (Simpson 2005a: 448) who want to add to their marketable skills to come back home and get a good job; we are competing with the ‘professionals’ and players of the gap year industry, who set the criteria by which a ‘Third World’ development experience will be judged.

In this market, what are our unique selling points? That we are ‘genuine’ and we offer a mix of theory and practice. Regarding the first, we are students ourselves, Indians mainly and activists. Regarding the second, we offer the summer school. In the pre-liminal period – the period of planning and anticipation of the liminal experience – this is our strength. During the liminal period it becomes a fatality. While in the UK, the participants are relieved to find a programme in India that begins with an ‘introduction,’ rather than just calling on them to ‘jump in.’ Quite correctly, they anticipate that the two week summer school will offer a comforting and pleasurable bonding experience with others from ‘home’; time for acclimatisation to weather, food and moral codes/social norms; and also pointers on how to deal with the ‘new world.’ It all looks very promising. In practice, after they arrive in India the summer school quickly loses its attraction and becomes boring, as the excitement of being in the new place is hard to contain in the classroom.

We recognised this in our reflections after the 2007 summer school, and sought to bring more activist activities and flavours into the programme when we came to repeat it the following year. Thus in the 2008 summer school we sought to introduce

participants to the singing, dancing and theatre that is an integral part of social movements in India. We organised an art session where participants together with a group of Indian art students managed to design and create innovative placards and posters on global issues of their choice. But we felt it was a struggle to get the participants to accept us as we were, as Indians, activists, students, people. It often seemed as if it was difficult for the DHRI participants to 'place' the Indians in the DHRI team; they could not quite take us seriously as either gap year professionals or 'real Indians,' and as these two categories seemed to exhaust the possibilities, we became invisible.

Two examples might make clearer the phenomenon I am describing here. Many of the participants in the 2008 programme were greeted at Sahar International Airport in Mumbai by Brendan and Sumedh Dalwai, the Programme Coordinator, India. During the summer school, we discovered that several participants who had been greeted in this way clearly remembered meeting Brendan at the airport – but could not remember meeting Sumedh. They simply did not see him or notice him. The second example came at the end of the 2008 DHRI programme. After the six week internship, we organised a one-day evaluation meeting in Mumbai and invited DHRI participants to join us; half of them did. During the meeting, two DHRI participants who had undertaken internships with organisations working with sex workers reflected on their experiences. They came to the conclusion that "Indian mothers don't seem to love their children very much." When I asked on what basis they were making this comment, they explained that they had observed the way the sex workers had behaved towards their young children when they came to pick them up from the crèche run by the organisation. These students had managed to make gross generalisations about Indian mothers based on their observation of a few sex workers – a group of Indian mothers most removed from the social norms of Indian familial structures.

What I believe these anecdotes serve to show is the strength of the structures that we set up DHRI in order to resist, and the limits of DHRI as a vehicle for resistance. I find Spivak's (1988) question, 'Can the subaltern speak?' useful for thinking about

the position in which the Indian members of the DHRI team find themselves. Their struggles to provoke the DHRI participants into reconsidering the Other and the Self's relationship with the Other are in vain, because the Indian members of the DHRI team *are* the Other. The Other can speak and can be heard, but only insofar as she appears as the authentic, 'genuine' Other imagined by the Self; it is in this sense that the Other is subaltern and *cannot* speak, cannot challenge the way she is represented. The sex workers, the street children – these are visible. They are the Indians that the DHRI participants paid money to visit and help. The DHRI team are invisible because they do not fall into the category of the idealised Other in the way that the sex workers do, and neither do they fall into the category of the familiar Self in the way that Brendan does. What this means is that DHRI has failed before it even started, because an invisible Indian cannot speak, cannot provoke the DHRI participants into reconsidering anything at all.

Brendan mentioned that when we asked them to consider the question 'What can East and West learn from each other?' they did not consider what West might learn from East. It is a serious matter indeed if there is nothing left to learn or if the capacity to learn from others or from a new experience is lost; I was reminded of this incident whilst watching James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), in which the wise old Na'vi woman says of the humans, "You cannot fill a cup that is already full."

In the DHRI experience, what I call the 'missionary syndrome' proved difficult to get rid of. I recall a number of conversations in which DHRI participants complained about being cheated by taxi and auto rickshaw drivers. One participant actually asked, "Why do they cheat us when we have come to their country to help them?" It was futile to explain that "the taxi drivers did not invite you. They do not know that you have come to help." Another participant indignantly told me that a group of them had come out of a coffee shop late at night only to find that no auto rickshaw was prepared to drive them home according to the meter; they rejected my explanation that they could not realistically expect a cheap fare when that coffee shop was charging Rs. 100 for a coffee (a cup of tea on the street costs Rs. 5) and Rs. 700 for a hookah pipe, and the rickshaw driver is earning Rs. 100 a day. I expected flexibility

and generosity from the participants while moving within India; they expected India to fall in line with Europe.

Ultimately I feel that attempting to use the liminal moment to provoke critical reflection was a clever idea but probably a lost cause. Perhaps what happens in the liminal moment – apart from the rendering of some Indian visible and others invisible – is that ‘Home’ is rendered visible in some ways and invisible in other ways. As noted earlier in the paper, travellers often immediately launch into a comparison of Home and Away. What the ‘What can East and West learn from each other?’ incident seems to suggest is that in this process Home is idealised as much (if not more?) than Away. Home becomes all that is normal and natural, Away becomes a collection of anomalies and deviances. When she is away from Home the traveller keenly recognises all the lovely things of Home; nostalgia erases the class, gender and other social structures that define Home,^{ix} and all the problems of the Home society seem insignificant compared to the problems of the place one is encountering. The severity and highly visible brutality of the problems in the new space – for example, extreme gender oppression – helps to erase the memory of the facts and forms of gender discrimination at Home.^x

In this section I have explained my view that the success and shortcomings of DHRI should be examined in the context of unequal global structures of race and nationality which decide access to resources, travel possibilities and the direction of volunteer tourist traffic from global North to the global South. This context not only offers an edge to the Northern youth, but also determines the value of people and worth of being by placing Southern peoples as subordinate. As a result, an organisation such as DHRI – positioned at the liminal moment of the Northern youth traveller – has little chance to provoke travellers into fresh, critical and politicised reflections on the relationships between the global North and South and the place of their volunteerism within those relationships.

Conclusion

In this paper we have drawn on work on the concept of liminality by Victor Turner and Van Gennep, but ultimately our analysis necessarily pushes the concept beyond the structuralist framework in which these scholars developed it. The dynamics of DHRI do not reflect a carnival-esque anti-structure at the margins of the social structures of Northern societies. Rather, they reflect the messy encounter between different sets of practices, social institutions, discourses and systems of representation which post-structuralist theorists have attempted to understand by moving away from the assumptions on which structuralist theory is based. The most obvious example of this in the paper is Sameena's argument that the DHRI summer school struggled to achieve its objectives because its internal structure brought into the classroom conflicting expectations associated with capitalist modes of production and an anti-capitalist emancipatory politics, a situation exacerbated by the confrontation between Orientalist expectations of the Other and an Other who refused to stick to their side of the binary opposition and remain docile, submissive and lacking. The DHRI summer school becomes a tempestuous meeting place of these conflicting desires and agencies, and the failure of DHRI to achieve its objectives is a reflection of the impossibility of an Indian Other gaining the upper-hand in this situation. Brendan's analysis, on the other hand, can only be more optimistic about the potential of the DHRI format because he neglects the influence of these external agencies and restricts his focus to the dynamics of the internal structure of the DHRI summer school which, by ignoring the influence of the world outside the doors of the classroom, he is able to characterise in terms of teacher-student relations.^{xi}

The question that follows, then, is why Sameena and Brendan come to such radically different conclusions. In writing this paper we decided we did not want to present the paper in terms of a forced consensus because we felt it would be productive to draw out the differences between our positions. Although we did not perhaps fully realise it at the time, doing so illustrates the arguments we are trying to make about North-South relations. If we allow ourselves to enter a reflective, auto-ethnographic moment here (Ellis and Bochner 2000), it is pertinent to note that we

do not occupy the same location within the field of North-South relations which we are seeking to theorise. We are treated differently because we are located differently: one of us is a woman of colour from the South and the other is a white man from the North.^{xii} In challenging the simplistic 'Contact Hypothesis' that she believes to be a prevalent idea in the gap year industry, Simpson (2005a) argues that "[t]o assume that a short period of contact with the stereotyped other will automatically contradict, and hence unseat, such stereotypes is, at best, naive" (2005a: 462). We would suggest that our conflicting analyses indicate that even a much longer period of contact, combined with what we both believe is a relatively open-minded perspective, may not be enough to dislodge the individual's perspective from the individual's location. Partly because we are analysing our own practice rather than that of others, we might not use Simpson's term – naive – but perhaps we might instead assess DHRI as "hopelessly optimistic".

At this point let us return to the comparison with which we opened this text, between the current generation of Northern volunteer tourists and their parents' generation of travellers. In a review of the literature, Angela Benson notes that the volunteer, rather than the volunteer's relationship to significant 'Others', "remains the focus of current research on volunteer tourism" (2011b: 2). We would suggest that while from an activist perspective we might not find this focus appropriate, it is at least reflective of what appears to be the reality – that the principal 'development' resulting from DHRI and programmes like it is the *personal* development of the volunteer. We might suggest that in this sense there is not much difference between the experience of today's volunteer tourists and yesterday's travellers. A traveller may learn a lot while moving through exotic lands, adding much to his or her life and perhaps also enriching the lives of the friends they tell about their adventures when they return home. Such an experience is perhaps more valuable than the experience gained by the volunteer tourist, precisely because it does not carry the baggage of having to change, improve, help the world; for the traveller, the only person to improve is oneself.

Seen from this perspective, we would tend to concur with the recent pronouncement by international development charity VSO that Northern youths are “better off backpacking” (Ward 2007). But on the basis of our analysis in this article we would go further, and say that in fact the volunteer tourist *is* a backpacker, *and* that they would be better off if they *call themselves backpackers* and stop carrying the load of the volunteer identity. If they call themselves backpackers then significant Others (including members of the DHRI team such as ourselves) won’t expect anything from them. In addition, they themselves may learn more if they shed the baggage of the “Why don’t they treat us nicely when we have come to help them?” mentality. To throw off the baggage of identities such as ‘volunteer’ or ‘activist’, to just be a person, a citizen, a friend, a lover, a teacher: that much is enough to change oneself and some part of the world.

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ⁱⁱHere, for instance, we limit our review of the literature on volunteer tourism to this endnote acknowledgment of the recent collection *Volunteer Tourism: Theory Framework to Practical Applications* edited by Angela Benson (2011a). Some contributions to that collection make reference to a critical literature that questions the possibility of volunteer tourism becoming a catalyst for the privileged western traveller to become an activist global citizen (e.g. Fee and Mdee 2011: 224-6; Ingram 2011: 218-9). However, we would suggest that none of the contributions to the *Volunteer Tourism* collection engage with our two central theoretical concerns in this article – host-guest relationships and the commodification of the 'volunteer' experience – in a way that speaks to these concerns in what we consider to be a useful way. Perhaps one reason for this might be that most contributions to *Volunteer Tourism* fit within the "Western, neoliberal, free market paradigms" that Wearing *et al.* (2005) claim dominate the tourism research agenda; we would agree with these authors that there is a need for more research on volunteer tourism starting from what Wearing and Grabowski (2011) refer to as "decommodified research paradigms" – by which they mean research "based upon feminist theory, ecocentrism, community development and post-structuralism" (2011: 194).

ⁱⁱⁱ On this point, Brendan would take a position that any attempt to make visible the multiplicity of voices in a text must necessarily rely on a *construction* of each voice as a unified identity – for example, one voice that is 'Brendan' and another that is 'Sameena' – which is at odds with a post-structuralist understanding of the thinking subject as a "*bricolage* of identifications," as a self that "takes up its identity through identifications with subject positions offered it by the situations [and not-

selfs] it encounters” (Bowman 1997: 44-45). Though it may seem needlessly academic to make this point (on this, see the end of this introduction), it is in fact crucial to the argument we make in the conclusion to this paper.

^{iv} While Crick (1985) has argued that there is little difference between travellers and anthropologists, it is worth drawing attention here to an article by Errington and Gewertz (1989 [2004]) which reflects on this comparison. Errington and Gewertz argue that while tourists and travellers “have little impetus or competence to go beyond self-reference” and that for them the significance of the other is largely limited to “what it does for oneself,” anthropologists base their theorising on “comparative data...collected since the nineteenth century” rather than “partial, simplified, and often completely erroneous information” (1989 [2004]: 207). As Augé and Colleyn (2006) put it succinctly, “[t]he anthropologist’s job is not limited to adventure in the field trying to understand societies from the inside, for the researcher travels with a whole library in his head” (2006: 97). Errington and Gewertz suggest that this means “[h]owever ultimately incomplete the understanding anthropologists have of the other, we are...incomparably better informed [than tourists and travellers]” (Errington and Gewertz 1989 [2004]: 207). On the comparison of tourists and anthropologists, see also Smith (1989).

^v In a discussion of volunteer tourism, Wearing and Grabowski (2011) theorise the way in which individuals draw upon “direct experiences to selectively perceive and reinforce their initial preconceptions” as “mis-communication in cross-cultural experiences” (2011: 201). They refer to a number of recent studies that identify the potential of volunteer tourism to foster cross-cultural misunderstanding (Griffin 2004; Raymond and Hall 2008; Simpson 2004), and indicate a number of other studies that may be useful for understanding how such mis-communications might be avoided, including Lewthwaite (1996), Rogers and Ward (1993) and Haberman and Post (1992).

^{vi} This situation is painfully ironic, because DHRI does not make sense as a business proposition. The costs of running DHRI lie almost entirely in the summer school and yet, as we will see below, the internship is the product our customers are really interested in. If we were after a quick profit we should scrap the summer school and set ourselves up as an agency connecting Northern youths with Indian nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), but this business proposition holds no attraction for us.

^{vii} Based on notes from the group discussion.

^{viii} Simpson (2005a) notes that a statement by Jack Straw, UK Foreign Secretary, that a gap year “is a great opportunity for young people to broaden their horizons” (Hogg 2001: 1, cited in Simpson 2005a: 453), is “used prominently by many providers and promoters of gap years” (Simpson 2005a: 454).

^{ix} Milan Kundera’s philosophical novel *Ignorance* (1999) speaks of the homeland that ceases to be home, showing how, in one’s absence, home remains in one’s memories in an idealised and nostalgic form.

^x Glenn Bowman (1997) offers us a somewhat different way to formulate the problem when he writes of “the modernist imperative to ‘identify’ the other as object” and contrasts this with “the process of coming to knowledge (of other and self) through ‘identifying with’ the other as subject” (1997: 47). In

DHRI our problem was that we assumed too easily that we could move from the first of these ways of knowing to the second; our participants did not make the move with us.

^{xii}Readers interested in this critique of Brendan's analysis might find bell hooks' (1994) critique of Diana Fuss's book *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* instructive. hooks argues that Fuss's analysis of essentialist invocations of the 'authority of experience' in the classroom suggests that speaking from experience in the classroom necessarily obstructs the sharing of knowledge, and implies that this is a crime practiced exclusively by students from marginalised groups. hooks suggests that Fuss never acknowledges that systems of domination such as racism, sexism, and class elitism are always already at work in the academy and the classroom, and that these shape the structure of classrooms in ways that "silence the voices of individuals from marginalised groups and give space only when on the basis of experience it is demanded" (hooks 1994: 81). Brendan is grateful to members of the Goldsmiths Educational Laboratory for Surprising Experimentation for drawing his attention to this text.

^{xiii} Here it seems appropriate to acknowledge another DHRI member who is differently placed to either Sameena or Brendan. Sumedh Dalwai (mentioned briefly earlier in the paper) was summer school coordinator for all three years in which we ran the DHRI programme (2007-9), and as such has probably made the largest conceptual and executive contribution to the success of running DHRI (almost) smoothly. Yet his voice is not present in this paper, and his absence draws our attention to another hierarchy and politics of location that is relevant here, namely the relationship between the activist and the academic. Sameena and Brendan are PhD students in UK universities, and as such have access to the 'production of knowledge' and the opportunity to discuss DHRI academically.