FALL 2007 WINNER Sophie Theis

INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD

My first conversation with Sophie about her idea for this essay occurred at a faculty dinner at Sophie’s dorm, during which Sophie engaged our table in a lively discussion about travel service programs aimed specifically at high-school students. In the weeks subsequent to that discussion, Sophie experimented with a range of writing styles and topics in my course on “Cross-Cultural Rhetoric,” but she returned to examine the glossy advertisements and alluring promise of teen travel programs. At the same time, she demonstrated a commitment to discovering a writer’s voice that was truly her own. Now, months after that first discussion, it is with delight that I introduce readers to her work in this collection of Boothe Prize essays.

In “Imitation vs. Internalization: The Rhetoric of Teen Travel Program Advertising for College-Bound Youth,” Sophie offers readers a beautifully written examination of those seemingly innocuous high-school ads for international service travel experiences, challenging our perceptions about what it means to help others, and forcing us to interrogate our love for travel, for self-discovery, and for doing good deeds across the globe. Her paper is timely and important: so many Stanford students arrive exhausted from meeting the challenge of admissions, with the kinds of programs Sophie interrogates fueling the fire of overachievement. As Sophie’s argument shows us, these programs mobilize visual rhetoric and parent testimonials to promise the development of an ideal character essential for the college application process. Sophie’s paper investigates the alarming new trend of “robo-students” as well as deeper questions of tourism and the authenticity of the intercultural encounter. Sophie scrutinizes the way we package our experiences for ambitious purposes, even while she shows her new expertise in crafting a careful argument about the rhetorical force of ads as persuasive texts.

Her essay is both a powerful and provocative piece, one that reflects the intellectual richness of Sophie’s own character and showcases her newly minted voice as a rhetorician and a scholar. She offers a powerful wake-up call in a voice that speaks for her generation. I hope it is a voice that we will continue to hear for years.

—Alyssa O’Brien
Travel is the subject of dreams, of lists of things to do before dying, of fiction, of boasting, of lifelong savings and planning. To travel is to escape, to change, to renew and to grow, and many, many people want to have these experiences. According to the World Tourism Organization, an estimated $735 million was spent in 2006, with over 842 million international tourist arrivals.

Today there are few demographics that are more attracted to the promises of travel than the modern privileged American youth. What differentiates this demographic from the other traveling types is that affluent college-bound high-school students are literally just that. Bound by college and constrained by high expectations, these youth are drawn to the idea of travel as an escape from their limiting day-to-day lives. However, with college-preparation indelibly imprinted on their minds, youth only half-heartedly cast off the confines of normal life; the travel experience is seen also as an advantageous tool.

Capitalizing on the frenetic competition for college admissions, a new industry of teen-targeted international service-oriented summer programs has evolved. These programs must meet contradictory demands, offering students a freeing experience diametrically opposed to day-to-day life while providing them with an advantage on their college applications. Programs such as Putney Travels, Global Routes, Where There Be Dragons, and many others bring students to the developing world to assist in projects that can involve building houses, tending to ecological reserves, or teaching English, alongside bonding with their small group of peers and their local host community. These trips promise self-improvement, self-discovery, and self-esteem in a package deal that requires only affluence to participate: the price tag varies from $4,000 to $8,000 for a multi-week international adventure.
Flip open a glossy, magazine-style 100-page catalogue of Putney Travels’ offerings—a one- or two-page spread for each destination, from Nicaragua to Nusa Penida, each destination categorized under community service, global action, cultural exploration, or language learning—and testimonials from past participants, detailed trip itineraries, romantic descriptions of the country, and photos of enthusiastic youth working hard and connecting with the local people in exotic locales paint for the reader a world quite different from his or her own. Indeed, it is on this distinction that the entire purpose of this breed of teen travel program turns: that participating on one of these trips will be liberation from daily life’s dissatisfactions, from the listlessness, routine, hollowness, role-playing, and artificiality tied up in the college-preparation experience. While offering an escape, these promises also cater to the desire for proof of good character, tangible validation that can be easily translated onto the resume. Despite being specifically purposed to offer freedom from social pressures, provide the opportunity for authentic engagement, and encourage self-discovery, these teen travel programs ultimately become yet another institution to encourage the imitation of qualities over their internalization, blurring the line between the values of others and one’s own goals.

To set the stage for understanding the specific teen travel program phenomenon, we must briefly touch upon some of the fundamental modern Western cultural assumptions and values tied up in the appeal of travel, across age demographics. People move for change—to find something new and to escape the old and familiar, to inhabit a sphere totally separate from daily life. In our postmodern mindset, dissatisfaction with the “mundane moment”—our day-to-day life—permeates our existence. We have become disenchanted by “desacralized modernity,” a term Crouch et al. coin in their introduction to The Media and the Tourist Imagination: Converging Cultures (Crouch et al. 10). It has become commonplace to criticize the mundane moment—we are well aware of the spiritual shortcomings of our current lifestyle, the lack of moral mooring to which Crouch et al. refer, the speed that drives progress but tramples interpersonal interaction. We wistfully acknowledge that modernity fails to fulfill certain basic human yearnings for experiences, such as authentic connections and freedom from prescribed roles.

For American high-school students in affluent professional communities primarily clustered on the east and west coasts of the United States, the mundane moment’s pressures are particularly demanding and pervasive. With college admission viewed as an indication of good character and a measure of self-worth, youth will frequently structure their entire lives around their admission decisions, often with adverse implications. Youth may model their lives after an ideal, a fictional character perfectly formatted for the college
application. This dream applicant would possess eye-catching standardized test scores; pristine transcripts; enough extra-curricular activities and academic honors to fill out all the provided lines; profound, sometimes nearly melodramatic life-defining experiences to prove one's character in the admissions essay; and good interpersonal relations to solicit a teacher's shining recommendations. Denise Clark Pope, author of Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students, observes in an interview with the Palo Alto Weekly online edition an unhealthily intense striving for this imagined ideal in an effort to garner college admission. “I see so many kids and parents striving for perfection—according to a flawed definition of success (super parents/über-kids). This is truly impossible.”

Such great emphasis on two-dimensional representation relegates internal growth and private processes to the bottom of the priority list. The result is that youth of today “have no time to reflect on what they are learning or doing,” as Pope explains to the Palo Alto Weekly, so that the reality of the teenage mundane moment is characterized by superficiality and artificiality. “Many admit that they are simply ‘doing school’”—not engaging in depth with material or even enjoying the activities that they do. As one student explains, “we are ‘robo-students’—just going page by page, doing the routine. School is lifeless,” reports Pope in the Weekly. This listlessness, engaging for the sake of external appearances, persists outside the classroom. “Apart from not feeling motivated to learn anymore, you also don’t want to do anything risky. People just do things to look good and get into school. Beyond that doesn’t really matter,” notes Stanford freshman Kristin Schmitz from Dallas, Texas.

But with the possibility of travel, many things can matter. Dissatisfaction with modernity fuels desires to escape from modern confines, but it also inspires travelers to pursue a fantasized new environment, one we will call the “travel moment.” This moment appeals as the antidote to modernity by evoking the illusion of an anti-modern utopia. We perceive of this “travel moment” as capable of rectifying the deficiencies of the “mundane moment” of modern living. Travel, notes Crouch et al. in the Tourist Imagination introduction, bridges a realm of experience we think of as otherwise practically inaccessible, allowing us to move from routine, work, immobility, restriction, and practicality into an arena where spontaneity, self-serving actions, and mobility come first (Crouch et al. 2). As Chris Ryan, author of “Stages, Gazes, and Constructions of Tourism” in The Tourist Experience, says, “Escape from home is often an escape from obligation” (Ryan 4). Tasks and demands of others are supposed to be absent in the travel moment; the world is rearranged to allow travelers the freedom denied them in normal life.
THE TRAVEL MOMENT: SEPARATE OR SEPARATED?

The literature of these volunteer summer programs presents an experience diametrically opposed to the mundane moment with extreme, nearly hyperbolic language, reinforcing this cultural perception of travel as separate. On their websites and brochures, the summer programs build the travel moment as an abnormally vibrant, hyper-life experience. Putney notes in its catalogue’s opening passage on the inside cover that “each year, many alumni report that their time with Putney was ‘the best summer of my life,’” and their parents describe their child’s growth as “far exceeding the benefits of a year at school.” Noting superiority to normal life and even the normal summer experience becomes a familiar refrain across the literature of this business. The website for Where There Be Dragons (W.T.B.D.) sets out their measurement of the intensity of the trip: “Go if you want your senses blown, your worldview challenged, and your life hugely enhanced by the dramatic difference of life in the underdeveloped world.” Through the ethos cultivated by the enthusiastic testimonials, the travel trips wield pathos to stimulate the teenage yearning to experience something separate from the day-to-day. Not just different, these trips are painted as superior in the potency of feeling as well as in the mere possession of feelings otherwise precluded by the mundane moment.

The advertising of these programs reiterates the idea of active engagement, a pair of qualities whose absence is responsible for the banal disconnect from life, feeling, meaning, and experience that characterize the teenage mundane moment. According to the Putney brochure, “participants are actively engaged,” and “through their active engagement in the group,” participants learn and grow through “activities that they are directly involved in planning and implementing,” or as W.T.B.D. puts it, “our programs are engaging, interactive sojourns.” Global Routes participants “are actively engaged in expanding their horizons.” Finally, “there’s nothing passive about a Putney program,” and on the W.T.B.D. website, “our programs are not for passengers; they are for participants!” The images that accompany this motivational text are consistently, and not surprisingly, of active youth: working on their service projects, trekking through scenic landscapes, or building relationships with the local people. In their expressions resides a mixture of wonder, happiness, and excitement; everybody is grinning in the photos.

Active engagement grows from authentic interest, a principal “lost” aspect of the teenage experience, considered stamped out by pressures to conform to the demands of the college application. The indicators of self-propelled, honest interest—creativity and expressiveness—have been noticeably
on the decline in an inverse relationship with college frenzy in recent years. “Because students are so busy all the time, because parents think that’s what they need to get into college…they don’t get into their imagination enough,” says Marilee Jones, dean of admissions at MIT, as quoted in the NPR article “School, Study, SATs: No Wonder Teens Are Stressed.” In the face of such a pervasive notion of the existence and legitimate pursuit of an ideal behavior, creative centers shut down, for imagination comes to be slated as superfluous to the task of grasping the essentials, passing tests and doing what is required. The departure of imagination can mean the loss of self-faith and confidence to explore. As journalists Deborah Stipek and Robin Mamlet posit in the San Jose Bee op-ed “The Culture of College Pressure,” “many of our brightest and most talented young people come to internalize the message that who they are must be ‘packaged’ into a shape that only partially resembles who they are at their core; in other words, they learn that who they really are is not enough.”

In professing to bring youth into an environment that appreciates the non-conforming individual, the travel programs’ over-enthusiastic support for authenticity deliberately caters to this insecurity. As part of its task to represent a world separate from the mundane moment, the travel programs emphasize how their trips allow and stimulate authenticity, where youth feel freed from social constructs. Particularly in a summer program, where a dozen or so youth are thrown together without prior knowledge of one another, youth are unburdened by their backgrounds or reputations. In essence, they can be whoever they want to be—or whoever they are.

Physical distance and temporal distance from home help contrive the sense of separation from modernity. The top of each page in the Putney brochure carries a banner of a geographical emblem of the country: a snow-covered peak for Ecuador and a lush strip of jungle for the Dominican Republic. Further photographic evidence only displays images of the countries as underdeveloped and poor, their people traditional and impoverished, establishing the anti-modern environment of the trips’ travel moments (fig. 1). Participants gleefully drink from coconuts in Nusa Penida, and on the India page, help a local man sculpt a clay pot by hand; no cars, washing machines, computers or paved roads appear in the entire brochure. Living conditions are always mentioned as simple, humble,
in local homes, schools, or dormitories. Old-fashioned sepia-toned mini-maps on each trip’s page highlight the country of interest and, with the absence of modernity’s artifice and excess, evoke authenticity in simplicity and timelessness.\(^1\)

Authenticity of participants is another professed value that distinguishes the travel moment from the mundane. Putney emphasizes its celebration of the uniqueness of each individual traveler, free from obedience to a certain social role, saying that trip leaders “are attracted to the opportunity to go beyond the superficial level and to get to know each participant as a mentor and a friend,” whoever they are. W.T.B.D. echoes this sentiment, stating that their leaders “actively encourage group members to explore the interests that inspire them as individuals.” Illustrating the effect of this endorsement of authentic interest are frequent photos of participants on their own engaging with locals; as in fig. 2, it looks like participants are allowed the autonomy and have gained the self-confidence to engage in independent enterprises. Passivity may be the natural reaction to the artifice and non-meaningful external demands of modern normal life, but with authenticity prioritized, the travel atmosphere is genuinely supposed to inspire personal interests and self-expression, regardless of the participants’ adherence to otherwise omnipotent social roles, as in the mundane moment. Meaningful connections appear to come more easily in such an environment. Photos with more than one participant are invariably group shots of the teens grinning, arms around one another; drawing on pathos to project the appealing image of a warm, inclusive, clique-less group where everyone is valued.

However, the invariability of the experiences expressed in the trips’ advertising points to the fact that a singular, streamlined perception is an effective tactic to appeal to youth who have been conditioned throughout their high-school college-preparatory life thus far to seek activities, qualities, and ideas that are easily translatable to paper. Being able to reduce complexity and condense it into two dimensions is prized, and college-centric teens pick up on this format of the travel fantasy, the thinking being that it will make for a good admissions essay because major ideas have already been proposed and clarified.

Even if youth are supposed to be allowed individuality on their trips, the independence of their perception of the travel moment is something worth questioning. With such extensive and homogenous descriptions and expecta-
tions for the programs, the experience is essentially pre-coded and pre-processed so that the participants, going into their trips, are perhaps excessively conscious of what they are supposed to perceive and how they are supposed to feel. In general, the categorization of the complicated mess that is life appeals to our desire for order and clarity; our life experience depends on a simplifying perception, or as Tim Oakes, author of “Get Real! On Being Yourself and Being a Tourist” suggests, we typically assume life matches up to the way we imagine and represent it (Oakes 244). But in these programs, the imagining itself is carefully cultivated by an external source, so much so that youth hardly have a role in determining the meaning of the trip. In this respect, the teens are actually allowed to be passive, and their individuality and independence of perception are not celebrated nearly as much as the trips claim. The rift here seems to suggest that merely being able to recognize the importance and value of authenticity and individuality means that one possesses those qualities. This type of face-value behavior is just what propelled the cycle of detachedness in the mundane moment and comes from the attitude that fundamentally prohibits the travel programs from separating their style of travel moment from teens’ mundane moment.

THE MOVEMENT (AND MERGING) BETWEEN MOMENTS

Travel creates the desire to experience a world separate from the normal life and seduces with the very promise that life is mutable, that someone’s current existence does not necessarily cement his or her path. The potential to travel offers the temptation to transcend boundaries and by extension, adjust oneself; as Crouch et al. states in the introduction to *The Media and the Tourist Imagination*, “the importance of the tourist imagination is that of suggesting a creative potential inherent in free movement between different spheres of life” (Crouch et al. 2). Not only can travel promise an escape from the limits of a singular sphere, it can also promise to dissolve the limits that delineate these mostly disconnected spheres of the self-insignificant and self-significant. It is a view that validates dissatisfaction and affirms dreaming for something one “deserves.” Youth are no longer defined by their uncontrollable environment.

For youth, recognizing that change is possible and, moreover, accessible to them is empowering; Tim Oakes in his essay, “Get Real! On Being Yourself and Being a Tourist” from *Travels in Paradox* explains that the sense of power comes from “the ‘escape’ into a purer ‘space’ of travel and mobility…in that it evokes a sense of control over an otherwise uncontrollable world.” (Oakes
That youth are able to escape their environment signals that their identity is not entirely dependent on its context, immutable and static, but rather, that it is an entity over which they have control. Highly professional brochures and websites and an emphasis on the safety and trustworthiness of their program and trip leaders—they are “fun, energetic, creative, safety-conscious, and knowledgeable” in the Putney catalogue—are ways that the travel programs foster the sense of ease of access to the treasures of the travel moment.

Promoting the idea that everyone can participate also diminishes the gap between the mundane and travel moment; they appear less separate or opposed. On most pages describing one of Putney’s trips, “Leader Profile” boxes reinforce the connection between the travel moment and the mundane moment not only by stimulating trust in the leader but also by demonstrating the relevance of one’s travels to normal life. In the example of the Senegal community service trip shown in fig. 3, Michelle Sriwongtong’s accomplishments start, as do all the other leader profiles, by listing her B.A. degree from Brown in International Relations, a reference that, by assuring readers of her competency and intelligence, reminds them about the indelibly impressive quality of college prestige. Second only to the trips she’s led, citing her degree from Ivy League member Brown University characterizes Michelle with the prestigious university’s own positive brand connotations before any of her own personal accomplishments. The passage continues with her condensed resume: a junior year abroad in Senegal, founding of a NYC nonprofit, and co-captain of Brown’s soccer team. Aside from building her ethos as a trustworthy leader, the leader profile is an illustration of what achievements can look like simplified onto paper. Impressing readers with quick rundowns of their leaders’ successes, Putney encourages emulation—more for the value of an impressive resume than for the experience behind the achievements, something that brief documentation like these blurbs or a college resume cannot really demonstrate. What Putney does demonstrate is that the travel moment can actually be converted into an advantageous tool for change in the mundane moment.
BE WHO YOU ARE AND END UP A CHANGED PERSON!

The movement between the mundane moment and the travel moment spheres, in freeing one’s character from a constraining context, opens the path for self-change and self-discovery. Explains Anderson Meethan in *Tourism, Consumption, and Representation: Narratives of Place and Self*, “It is as if, in the past, an individual biography would be linear in nature, and socially prescribed by occupation, family role, and social class; they are now self-produced and producing” (Meethan 3–4). But for modern youth, the ability to create a “biography,” to define one’s life, is a double-edged sword. While potentially empowering, the liberty of constructing a personal biography can mean that teens take their autonomy in crafting themselves to such an extent that they sculpt their character into one that shares no similarities to their true sensibilities and sensitivities, all in an effort to “look good” for college and within their community. One manifestation of this is engagement in extracurricular activities that hold no sincere interest for the teen but look good on paper. If teens can be whoever they want to be, why not be the ideal, the flawless college applicant? It is an easy role to assume because it mostly requires diligence and effort, and does not really depend on sincerity.

One of the central paradoxes of teen travel advertising is that while assuring participants that their trips will alleviate the mundane moment’s pressures to be someone other than oneself, they simultaneously advertise with exuberance change of self. In this way, travel literature perhaps unintentionally repeats the message from college, from parents, and from peers, the message that with their emphasis on individuality they are claiming to counteract: that there does exist an “uber-youth,” an ideal to aspire to. The very values and qualities that the program’s language uses—intending to emphasize the authentic, self-revelatory atmosphere of the trip—then end up crafting a cohesive image of an uber-youth. In a time when youth are actively seeking roles that can translate on paper, describing ideal characteristics inspires imitation and often a trashing of authentic self.

Harnessing the insecurities and shortcomings of the mundane moment, the qualities promised help project their trips as the antidote to the mundane moment, but also as the antidote to the average teen in normal life, the opposite of the person actually reading the brochure or skimming the website. Ethos-packed testimonials from parents deliberately resonate within the framework of the teen pressure cooker that is the high-school college-preparatory experience. Quotes such as “Rachael stepped out of her American teenage box” and “Daniel is older, wiser, and more alive than he was when he left” illustrate that the change in the travel moment are manda-
tory for these qualities; youth will not possess these qualities until they have participated in one of these trips. This message quickly converts into a call for everyone to change, that all the normal readers out there could make improvements in this direction. Also, the very construction of “before-and-after” suggests a reduced linearity that, while adequate for listing achievements on the college application, cultivates a life view that measures success in tangible results—often imagined and crafted to match up to outside pressures or an externally constructed paradigm like those of the travel programs.

By introducing boundaries into the sphere that is perceived as free and amorphous, these qualities and the notion of the uber-youth articulate a role that teens are implicitly encouraged to play. Any type of traveling can fall into role-playing even as the travel moment is seen as liberated from roles. As Tim Oakes argues in his essay “Get Real! On Being Yourself and Being a Tourist,” “We are seduced by the role of the traveler, the adventurer, the exile, the tourist.” (Oakes 245). This can become dangerous when the roles are so strong that the validity of individual experiences is measured against the set of criteria one’s imagination and the travel program rhetoric has erected around the trip; as Oakes notes, “the world must be reconfirmed by others.” (Oakes 245). In this way a dependency on an external processor is cultivated; not only is individuality again somewhat suppressed, youth also are a no longer under the obligation to create meaning themselves. Rather, they can continue to take it at face value, as imposed by others—much as life is for them in the mundane moment.

The other qualities these trips pack into the image of the uber-youth sound great, particularly appealing because they echo college application expectations, but they continue to propagate the notion of “label-qualities,” or characteristics that require no effort or pain to acquire. Life-long friends, leadership skills, ownership over their work, and learning to “push out of my comfort zone” are attributes that appear throughout the genre; Putney’s brochure states on their first page, “the maturity, self-confidence, global perspective, and sensitivity towards others that participants develop are derived from close friendships, personal discovery, and the tremendous satisfaction of conquering new challenges.” Verb choices like “are derived” touch upon the backstory of these qualities but rely on cliché to communicate their value. Additionally, even “conquering new challenges” becomes something fun
and easy, a process by which to gain “tremendous satisfaction,” and not the other way around, in which some positive feeling would motivate actions. By inculcating solely domesticated, abstract ideas into the minds of the potential participants, skipping the difficulties, the how and why, the language glosses over the process of internalization of these qualities.

As in fig. 4, the “close friendships” that youth will have ideally developed through their trips are accepted as a simple task, especially in regard to the local people. In the description of the Dominica trip, nothing is even required of the youth to establish good relations, for the “neighbors often stop by with gifts of fresh fruit” at their residence. Nearly every program page includes a section describing effortless collaboration and communion between locals and travelers; in the Dominican Republic, “students get together with friends in the community, playing baseball or learning to dance the bachata in the open air.”

Despite much photographic evidence of youth and locals working together happily (fig. 5) and at least a sentence in every trip description mentioning “friends” in the community or some sort of ostensibly uncontrived coming together, relations with people from other backgrounds are intrinsically fraught with complications that remain unnoted in the travel program literature. Ivan Illich, in his 1968 address to the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects in Mexico, scoffs at the notion of the hyper-privileged youth and the hyper-impoverished rural residents connecting in any meaningful, equal-footed way. “You can only dialogue with those like you…there is no way for you to really meet with the underprivileged, since there is no common ground whatsoever for you to meet on,” he asserts, drawing on school dropout statistics that immutably separate Latin America (and presumably other underdeveloped countries) and the United States. Stanford Ethics of Public Service professor Rob Reich cited Illich’s “go-to-hell” condition that would serve as a litmus test of an interaction that could really be considered a connection based on equality: “namely, don’t do the service unless the people you’re serving are capable of telling you to go to hell if they don’t want you there.” Prizing deep, meaningful connections when it is a very unlikely prospect, or labeling interactions as bonding, then, propels the cycle of surface-value labeling that teenagers are used to in their mundane moment. The process is brushed aside as unimportant in comparison to the use, the value of the experience to normal life.
Indeed, there is a distinctive absence of hardships and moments of doubt. The testimonials and trip descriptions fail to clarify that the qualities advertised take work to truly possess. As Ann Hulbert argues in her Slate.com piece on “Servi-Tourism: Community Service, Three-Star Style,” “Kids may well be missing out on the true—and less than gloriously transformational—growth opportunity that community service has to offer America’s micro-managed youth elite: an occasion to be a lowly cog and have to cope with real-world glitches.” Is it easy to discover yourself and be yourself, and only yourself? Is it comfortable to bond with others—especially with the local people with whom you have so little in common? Hulbert laments that these service programs fail to offer an “unmediated glimpse of how difficult some social chasms can be to cross.” Since the message is virtually silent on the real gritty process, youth receive broad encouragement to imitate these qualities. Eager for role models, youth translate this selective communication into a message directing them to display, but not necessarily possess or go through the process to obtain, these qualities. Internalization, not emphasized, comes across as unnecessary.

It is unfortunate that well-meaning travel programs, intending to offer an authentic, liberating experience different from teens’ day-to-day lives, fail to communicate a separation between the mundane and the travel moment because elements of the mundane moment persist in the travel moment. Youth are attracted to the program to escape from the pressures of their mundane moment but end up further bound by the trip’s prescriptive, pre-coded experience with its roles and expectations, and the qualities of the uber-youth replicate the striving to be someone else in the day-to-day sphere, which the youth were trying to escape in the first place. Painting the experience as simple, accessible, and easy, the service trips support the surface-value culture wherein the ultimate value of an experience is in the ability to translate to paper and to prove self-worth for others.

The confusion between bound and free, helping and helped, role-playing and role-creating could be elucidated by an explicit acknowledgement of the distinction between external and internal aims. First, the trips could include in their advertising a section on the college pressures so present in participants’ minds so that they could be clear and aware of their motivation for the trip. This might help free them from subconscious college-obsession, that lingering constraint of the mundane moment that, as it is now, persists in the travel moment, unthreatened and just as actively dictating their behavior. Second, if the trips made a point of emphasizing the individualization of the experience in its advertising, perhaps in the form of diary entries encouraged or group discussions, participants would likely enter the trip feeling that
their individual opinions were truly valued to others and to themselves. And third, if a greater attempt was made to discuss the difficulties that face the travelers—to acknowledge their status as tourists and foreigners, rather than presenting successes like they came naturally—the programs would affirm the necessity of self-propelled effort to gain qualities, and, additionally, the importance of engaging in experiences not for an end result that will look good and prove good character, but for one's own curiosity and desire for exploration.

NOTES

1 The local people too must support the separation of the mundane and travel moment. In theory, pretentiousness and adherence to binding social roles evaporate in an environment physically removed from a dominant culture of flawed modernity. But since the local culture is often indecipherable and not explored, the travelers really face few barriers in interpreting the atmosphere as they like. There is very little inherent in the local culture that supports authenticity; rather, it is the distance from understanding these communities that allow “constructive authenticity, a projection of authenticity onto objects,” people, and places that often have nothing to do with the actual nature of the subjects themselves (Ryan 8).

2 Having an external presence casting roles, creating meaning, and dictating perception casts in doubt the fundamental pursuit of authenticity through the travel moment. As the central tenet of the teen travel program, an atmosphere of authenticity is also a primary distinguisher between the mundane and travel moments. Explains Oakes, even as the tourist “recognizes the alienation and inauthenticity of the world…in the process, we find ourselves ‘objectifying’ and reifying authenticity itself.” With a Berman quote at the outset of his essay, Oakes argues that the pursuit of authenticity is futile and even self-destroying, in that the search would necessarily shift into seeking a pre-conceived perception. If authenticity is an unconstructed, “pure” experience, any pre-coding of an experience will negate it.

3 Self-change through travel is a longstanding expectation of the tourist. As we have discussed, radical departures from what Oakes deems “modernity’s dualisms” clears the path for a more authentic atmosphere that can bring out a more authentic self, separated from the social constraints and adherence to social roles of the mundane moment. The different role—the role of tourist—can be more a liberating role than a confining role. With a new sphere dedicated to the tourists’ whims and pursuits, the tourist can slip into the role of protagonist, central character into a self-constructed narrative wherein he or she can experiment.

4 Selective imagery in the teen trip rhetoric argues visually for the good relations between the Other and the visiting youth. The vast majority of the images of the Other in the Putney brochure and on the Global Routes website is of children. One reason for the youthful dominance is that children are not yet aware of social norms. Also, children’s eagerness to be friendly and connect with strangers buttresses the idealist notion of commonality or universality across cultures, a sentiment echoed by a past participant who noted that despite their lack of shared language or culture, he was able to find “the common interest that unites us” through nothing more challenging than dance and games. In this way, the Other is different in a good way—inviting and easy to connect with.

5 Additionally, Illich reframes how he sees the travelers who do not speak the language, “[you] impose yourselves on a village where you are so linguistically deaf and dumb that you don’t
even understand what you are doing, or what people think of you.”

The professed aim of these programs, volunteerism loses some of its potency when it is centered on the benefit of the givers. For one, clearly the amount of money spent on one of these trips would be more effective as a public service donated to a professional charity program working the area—and then, the training and preparedness of the youth to build houses or teach English is doubtfully sufficient to be even basically helpful, especially considering the small time frame in which the youth are physically present. And on top of that, the in-and-out quality of the service, its temporality, prevents truly deep connections with projects or with the local people. La Piana said his daughter considered the “service component less satisfying.” Constructing a community center, “basically all they needed Americans to do was buy the materials. A bunch of men from the village knew all they needed to do to build the community center. They did not need a bunch of American kids who had never in their life swung a hammer to ‘help’ them.”

Because it creates questionable economic value that is still nevertheless lauded, the community service component also threatens to support a patronizing, unequal subject-Other division between youth and the local people. Illich condemned this type of “servi-mission” as a “benevolent invasion of Mexico” that “exude[s] self-complacency.” Since youth are ill suited to offer something of value, due to the pre-set conditions of the short trip without training or skill requirements, their work’s priority is only on others as part of the illusive pretending. Being told that they will be and are a helpful presence encourages youth to plow ahead confident in their worth and in the neediness of the local communities. They are told through their ineffective, yet celebrated, labor that they, being privileged Americans, are somehow innately more capable and competent than the locals.

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Images from Putney website and 2007 brochure.