

Imagining Heritage Through Dreams of Travel

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Abstract

This paper anthropologically examines the travel desires of a group of adolescents in New York City. They are first-generation descendants of African and Caribbean migrants to the United States, yet all but one have never themselves been abroad. Rather, they have grown up in difficult circumstances in what they demonstrate, through the ethnography, to be a city of segregated contrasts. Nonetheless, these young people express an acerbic awareness about the history and politics of the world. They inform themselves about issues pertaining to history, race and cosmopolitanism through patchworks of resources not found in school, including literature and the internet. In fact, their imaginations of heritage and aspirations for mobility are articulated as direct reactions to the suffocating senses of misinformation and limitation they perceive in their schooling and society. These deficiencies are framed by participants as rationale to expand their education and to explore the world. Compounded by senses of ambiguity and inquisitiveness about their ethnic histories, “travel” is heralded as a replenishing means of reconnecting with a dis-located past. Drawing upon the theoretical notion of the ‘ethical imagination’ (Moore, 2011) – on the ways in which ‘the world’ is lived through people’s ‘worlds’ – the legacies of (forced) transatlantic migration are here drawn out through the perspectives of contemplation, speculation and informal education. This builds upon an important, underexplored issue in tourism studies on those who dream of travel but are unable, for structural reasons, to do so (Ward, 2014; Thurnell-Read, 2014). In this instance, diasporic offspring hope that their uncertain roots of migration will clarify and materialize, once they get the chance to see the past for themselves. This research was conducted for my Master’s thesis at Columbia University, and relates to my current doctoral research, also in New York City, on the aspirations and emotions of young people.