

Peripheral Visions

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Abstract

There is a growing recognition that senior tourism has significant socioeconomic benefits for countries with ageing populations (Bates, 2004; Small, 2003; Vojvodic, 2015) and that the practices of older travellers need further investigation. As baby boomers come of retirement age, a growing number of “digital seniors”, individuals over the age of sixty who are proficient Internet users (Quan-Haase, Martin, & Schreurs, 2016), is creating and sharing narratives of their travel via blogs. Still, seniors are often relegated to the wrong side of the digital divide and, although this gap is rapidly diminishing (McMurtrey, Zeltmann, Downey, & McGaughey, 2011), the critical examination of senior travel bloggers, or silver tourists, and their narratives remains on the peripheries of academic debate. This is due in some part to predictions of the demise of blogging (Heer, 2016; Kottke, 2013) and the current research focus on narratives of younger bloggers, particularly budget travellers and backpackers. In response, this paper draws on various sociolinguistic approaches and theories of travel to examine how senior travel blogs negotiate the persistent tensions between Self and Other, escape and social connectedness, home and away. In so doing, it aims to reach a better understanding of these narratives engage with concepts and discourses both integral and peripheral to the writing of travel.

(Re) Writing Silver Travel: Examining the Peripheral in Senior Travel Blogs

Researching the theme of “peripheral visions” is an eminently satisfying exercise—an initial search on *Google Scholar* yielded no fewer than 2810 results, at the time of writing, for books and journal articles that spanned various disciplines and issues including such diverse subjects as migration, foreign policy, film, fiction, art and writing. This is perhaps not surprising for the concept of core/periphery is imminently suited for ascribing structures, describing mobilities, and interpreting various socio-cultural phenomena both in physical spaces as well as online ones. It informs much of the writing of travel and research into travel writing, to explain colonisation, globalisation, migration and tourism as well as a host of other issues. For example, many post-colonial approaches traditionally view travel in terms of a movement between a Home that lies at a usually Occidental centre to an Away located in an exotic and peripheral destination away from the superior civilisations of the West (Pratt, 1992). Other critical approaches describe the practices, experiences, and writing of travel as a constant negotiation of an individual’s internal core Self with an external and peripheral Other (Blanton, 2002). Amongst scholars of the social sciences and information theorists, the paradigm has found application in social network theories that interpret the blogosphere as an online space occupied by a vast network of interconnected texts, some of which are central to conversations on certain topics while others remain at the fringes. These A-list blogs form the core of an online community and draw information from other blogs at their peripheries (Efimova, Hendrick, & Anjewierden, 2005). A single blog is structured around a Home page and is conceptualised as forming the core or “central node” of a larger networked narrative whose content centres in the blog and extends across various online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and photo- and video-sharing websites (Helmond, 2010). A “peripheral vision” then, seems particularly appropriate to the examination of the travel blogosphere and for understanding senior travel blogs as networked narratives, as narratives of an online Self, and as peripheral texts in a larger conversation about travel.

However, the purpose of this paper is not merely to view senior travel blogs within this framework and point out how useful this approach is, for no theoretical framework ever fits so neatly and to assume it does would be to produce a simplistic and narrow view of senior travel blogs. Neither is it to position these texts as marginalised narratives, albeit these blogs are somewhat overlooked by academic scrutiny. Rather, it is the ill-fitting edges of the

picture of senior travel blogs drawn within this framework that are most intriguing, for they provide insights from the periphery of the writing of silver travel that contest accepted notions of travel, blogging and narratives of senior travel experiences.

Although scholars of various disciplines have effectively utilised the paradigm of the core/periphery to interpret particular contemporary cultural and social phenomena since the 1960s (Smith & Katz, 1993), it should be also recognised that the model is has its own weaknesses. The periphery is generally conceived as being inseparable from the core and is defined by its opposition to the centre. It is, like the circle inscribed by the compass in John Donne's love poem "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," dependent on the fixedness of the centre itself. However, such an imagining of the real world or of the online one that is the blogosphere allows the existence of one centre alone and only recognises elements that lie within the periphery inscribed around it. All else beyond these boundaries remains disregarded and has little significance. There is also an underlying assumption that the core and periphery are inevitably and inextricably linked. In the context of the blogosphere or an online community, for example, this is to suggest that all blogs are linked to each other and that blogs outside this network cannot be said to have any meaningful existence or contribution to a conversation on the issues that hold the core and periphery together. Furthermore, it leaves little room for the possibility that one man's core may be another man's periphery. In nineteenth century travel writing, for example, the core/periphery concept allows for a critical interpretation of the marginalisation of colonised peoples and their cultures and the promotion of Imperialist core civilisations from where all travellers emerged. Such a view overlooks travel from colonised parts of the world to Europe or travels within the peripheries and between other continents, such as those of Ibn Battuta or Xuanzang. Despite this, the metaphor still has its advocates and applications in academic inquiries of place, identity, and mobility. In the appropriately titled *Peripheral Visions/Global Sounds*, José Colmeiro advocates the concept of the peripheral as a "far-sighted, curious eye, which sees the bigger picture", which he suggests allows for an understanding of a "wider context" (2018, p. 3). Colmeiro is no lone proponent of this view, and his book is but one example of the prevalence of this metaphor in contemporary academic inquiry. For these reasons then, focusing the conceptual lens of the core/periphery on the travel blogs of senior tourists extends an ongoing and well-established critical tradition.

While there is an emerging interest in senior tourists who use social media and more broadly in digital seniors who are capable of creating online narratives (McMurtrey,

Zeltmann, Downey, & McGaughey, 2011; Quan-Haase, Martin, & Schreurs, 2016; Sinclair & Grieve, 2017), for the most part the writing of travel blogs by seniors has remained at the peripheries of academic debate. Current research has largely been concerned with the representation of place rather than the writers who describe place in travel narratives and has generally treated all bloggers, regardless of age, as a generic whole (Carson, 2008; Wenger, 2008). In addition to this, some critics have dismissed blogs as a declining online genre (Heer, 2016; Kottke, 2013). In such a climate, senior travel blogs are easily relegated to the margins of critical debates on the writing of travel online. In order to address this lacuna in the academic conversation, this paper applies the metaphor of core/periphery to senior travel blogs and argues, as Colmeiro does that this allows for greater insights into “wider contexts” of the writing of silver travel.

Acknowledging the inadequacies of the core/periphery concept is a first step to critically examining how senior travel blogs both embrace and reject this metaphor. The paper begins by examining how the core/periphery metaphor problematizes assumptions about the narrative forms and function of travel blogs in general and senior travel blogs in particular. It then addresses the personal and self-presentational aspects of the writing of senior travel in blogs to understand how the peripheral informs these narratives. Finally, it examines how various discourses and practices within senior travel blogs both support and destabilise the notion of what is held to be peripheral in travel writing. This provides a more nuanced understanding of discourses central to the writing of travel—Home and Away, Self and Other, escape and social connectedness—so lending further insights into the narrative practices of senior travellers as well as the position and significance of senior travel blogs in the wider blogosphere.

Blogs and the periphery

The structure of blogs, when viewed both individually and as a body of narratives comprising the blogosphere, lends itself well to the idea of a core surrounded by peripheral elements. However, the practices of travelling and blogging as well as the technological underpinnings of these narratives, which determines how they are displayed, accessed and

navigated online, unsettles assumptions of what constitutes Home and Away. Bloggers and their readers experience the narrative differently. Furthermore, both the writing of travel online and keeping a blog may be considered peripheral activities, and this suggests that travel blogs are best understood as peripheral narratives.

Blogs are described as online diaries comprising posts that appear in reverse-chronological order. The term “blog” has its origins in “weblog”, which in turn alludes to the captain’s log or journal kept during a voyage (Rettberg, 2013, p. 30), suggesting that this genre of online writing is particularly appropriate for a narrative of travel. The main feature of a blog is its “Home” page, which serves as a central point from which a writer may begin his or her narrative of travel, and from which readers may subsequently navigate their way to the various posts that constitute the narrative, suggesting a further association with travel. The other structural elements, often seen as defining features of the blog, include a blogroll or set of links to similar texts, comments from readers, and links to other online platforms through which the blogs authors extend the content of the blog narrative and so enhance its general visibility to a wider audience (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006; Helmond, 2010). In such an imagining, the blog forms a narrative core that links to various peripheral texts written by the same author that also interconnect with each other. The blogroll is particularly significant as it situates the narrative within a community of other blogs on the same topic, and within a public conversation where it enjoys either a central or peripheral position, depending on the prominence and interaction of its author with other bloggers and readers.

The resonances between travel and writing or blogging are all the more apparent when considered within the framework of core/periphery. If travel is generally conceptualised as a movement from a familiar core or Home to a comparatively unknown periphery or Away, as was often the case with European travellers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then the writing of travel within a blog can similarly be seen as a movement from a Home page to posts that beyond this centre and content on other platform even further Away. Such conceptualisations of travel and of blogging are nevertheless inherently problematic. They promote a unidirectional view of travel and blogging as processes that moves from the centre to the periphery. In the context of travel, this elides any other form of mobility such as the current migration of refugees from Central America, Northern Africa and the Middle East, tourists from Far-Eastern countries who visit Europe and the travel that takes place within and between the supposedly peripheral countries of the Americas, Africa and south-east Asia. In the context of blogging, the idea of a narrative that extends from a narrative core

to its peripheries positions the Home page as a focal point for a narrative in which the writing of travel always occurs at its outermost margins, extending further and further away from the centre as the traveller continues on a journey and uploads posts about the same. However, given the reverse-chronological structure of the blog form, what is usually visible in the Home page of a travel blog is in fact its most recent post, perhaps describing a travel experience away from home. As a result, in the very instant that this post is viewed by a reader there is a subsequent collapse between the ideas of Home and Away when the peripheries of the blog are viewed and accessed at its core.

Despite the potential for this happening, it is highly unlikely that a reader of the narrative will follow such a narrative path. Search engine results often determine how blog narratives are accessed and read. In fact, readers are likely to first locate individual blog posts using a search engine and may only then (if at all) choose to view the Home page of the blog. The narrative path that the reader travels is better imagined more often than not as a movement from the boundaries of the blog to its centre or better yet as one that traverses the edges of various blogs without ever reaching their Home pages.

Another technologically determined phenomenon worth noting is that blogs hosted independently are accessed quite differently to blogs hosted on websites such as *Off Exploring* or *Travelblog*, travel-specific platforms that allow individuals to create blogs and post entries which are subsequently searchable by destination or categorised by date. Depending on the nature of the keywords used, search engines on these platforms can direct readers to individual blog posts instead of the Home page and so privilege content that lies in a blog's peripheries. Readers visiting these websites are directed to the newest posts on the website or a list of featured bloggers, suggesting that the real "home" for the posts is the main page or the search results page of the website or platform that hosts the travel blogs. As new entries are constantly being written and posted there is a fluidity to the narratives around a single destination, and in such platforms the destination gains precedence over the blogger who writes the post or the blog as a whole. The narrative path that each individual traces is unique as descriptions of place are continuously inscribed and reinscribed by the algorithms that govern content. That is to say, that a reader searching for posts on Sydney on *OffExploring* on one day will probably see a different set of posts and follow a different narrative path to the reader who performs the same search on the following day. Furthermore, such a reader may read several posts across various blogs on Sydney without ever reading the Home pages of the blogs they are drawn from. Ultimately, readers' travels through such a

blog are often at its boundaries, so that its peripheries enjoy greater significance than its centre.

The core/periphery model has also been more broadly applied to explain the interactions and relationships at work in communities of bloggers. In such interpretations, a single blog and its attendant narratives lies at the core or periphery of a network of other blogs. These blogs are generally connected to each other via blogrolls and through shared public conversations on specific themes or issues. Some topics and conversations in the blogosphere predominate over others. According to a recent, albeit limited, survey of the blogosphere most of these ideas and opinions expressed online are on personal development with business coming in as a close second (Convertkit, 2018). Travel is comparatively insignificant, coming in at fifteen in a list of twenty hot topics. Depending on its visibility and influence, a blog may be relegated to the margins of such a themed conversation as a “lurker”, or lie at its core as an “A-list blog” or “influencer” whose significance and audience is comparatively larger than that of other blogs on the same topic (Efimova et al., 2005; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). The *Forbes* listing of “Top Influencers of 2017,” which includes such prominent bloggers as Kate McCulley of *Adventurous Kate*, suggests that most travel influencers are young, generally in their mid-twenties and thirties. Senior travel voices are largely unrecognised online, although not necessarily unheard. Websites such as *Trip Advisor*, *Over Sixty* and *Getting on Travel* feature lists of senior travel blogs or Baby Boomer blogs that testify to the growing number of travel narratives written by older travellers and retirees.

If blogs like *Glamour Granny Travels*, *Gypsy Nesters*, *Passionate Retirees*, *Senior Nomads*, or *Gallivanting Grandma*, to mention just a few senior travel narratives, are largely overlooked or unmentioned in online conversations about travel, this is in part due to the very different ways in which these narratives position themselves and engage with the blogging fraternity. Links to other travel blogs are conspicuously absent in the three blogs mentioned here. While some senior travel blogs have sophisticated structures and layout and are networked over a number of platforms that typify the core-periphery model described earlier, others limit their accounts of travel to posts within the blog. Among the three texts mentioned here, the *Passionate Retirees* blog, like *Glamour Granny* and *Gallivanting Grandma*, is self-contained, with no links to content on other platforms such as Facebook or Twitter but *Senior Nomads* and *Gypsy Nesters* do link to a Facebook page via which the authors interact with readers and which, at the time of writing had over two thousand followers. *Gypsy Nesters* has

a strong web presence with content networked from the blog across multiple platforms. Approaches that frame blogging communities as held together by reciprocal linking and participation in shared conversations inevitably fail with respect to senior travel blogs such as the ones described above. This is not to say that a shared conversation does not exist, for the interactions between bloggers of *Senior Nomads* and its readers exemplify the conversation societies that Viviane Serfaty sees as a characteristic of blogs. The senior travel blogosphere, then is best thought of as consisting of many independent conversations, each having a blog or blogger at its centre, but generally disengaged from the mainstream discussions around narratives of younger travel influencers such as *Adventurous Kate*.

Renowned travel writer Dervla Murphy points out that younger travellers are more dependent on the Internet than seniors. In a preface to an anthology of senior travel writing, she observes:

The Internet has brought a change in the very concept of travel as a process taking away from the familiar into the unknown. Now the familiar is not left behind and the unknown has become familiar before one leaves home...Moreover, relatives and friends evidently expect greater reassurance about the traveller's precise location and welfare—and vice versa, the traveller needing to know that all is well back home (Murphy, 2015, p. xi)

Murphy's preface is critical of younger travellers' "timidity" and what she sees as their over-reliance on social media platforms for planning and undertaking their journeys. She points out that social media have widened the generational gap in travel, so that the unpredictability and spontaneity that made travel so desirable to older generations is disliked by contemporary travellers. The comparative scarcity of senior travellers who blog and their reluctance to use social media while on a journey may explain why senior travel bloggers are not as prominent or influential as their younger counterparts. Admittedly, seniors are less likely to use social media than younger adults and teenagers, and there is research to support the existence of a digital divide between generations. The same Convertkit survey cited earlier found that most bloggers were within the ages of 25 and 35.

Having said this, it should be acknowledged that blogging has on the whole been described as a declining practice and form. According to prominent blog critic, Jason Kottke the genre enjoyed its heyday in the decade between 2003 and 2013. Since then, there have been a number of predictions of its imminent demise, usually qualified with the observation

that the genre has evolved or has found its way to other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, or as *Guardian* writer Onur Kabadayi expresses it, “morphed into a mature part of the publishing system.” What matters here is not whether blogs are dead, dying, or still alive albeit in a different form. More significant is the shift in both academic and public interest from blogs to other online media and the general perception that this online genre has been marginalised by Facebook and Twitter. Certainly, the events of the past year or two have ensured that much debate of the use and misuse of social media is firmly focused on the latter two platforms while blogs, earlier seen as a revolutionary form, have been relegated to the sidelines. A second point to note is that critical examinations of travel blogs have largely treated these narratives as a generic whole, undifferentiated by the age of the bloggers, tending instead to focus on questions of what is written about destinations, traveller behaviour and touristic consumption of place. Approaches that focus on senior travellers’ use of social media are few and far between (see Vigolo, 2017; Vigolo & Confente, 2013). Many of the younger bloggers whose narratives are cited by researchers are often backpackers and consequently represent a niche area of tourism.

For the present, it appears that senior travel blogs lie in the peripheries of the blogosphere and the online writing of narratives of travel. Despite arguments to the contrary, however, there is also more recent evidence to suggest that in some communities the gap is narrowing (Damant, Knapp, Freddolino, & Lombard, 2017) and there is a growing recognition of the existence of “digital seniors” who are increasingly adept at using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to meet their informational and interactional needs (McMurtrey et al., 2011; Quan-Haase et al., 2016; Sinclair & Grieve, 2017). It is also likely that affluent and more digitally competent seniors of the Baby Boomer generation will swell the numbers of “digital seniors” and senior travellers, and by extension senior bloggers who write about travel. To ignore the very real and growing contribution of senior travellers to travel literature and the blogosphere would be to disregard the fact that the peripheries of writing travel are constantly being redefined.

Travel and the periphery

If the blog genre and its attendant debates are fading into online obscurity, they are only now being acknowledged in discussions of what constitutes travel writing. It is not easy to explain comprehensively what travel writing is and what constitutes travel literature, as the

genre constantly defies clear definition. Noting its “fuzzy” boundaries and the “bewilderingly diverse” range of narratives grouped under this category, Carl Thompson broadly described travel writing in 2011 as “a constellation of many different types of writing and/or text” including sub-genres such as accounts of pilgrims, guidebooks of various eras, and more literary forms such as the modern travel book. His definition relies heavily on Jonathan Raban’s often quoted appraisal of travel writing as a “notoriously raffish open house” as well as Jan Borm’s inclusion of fictional and nonfictional travel-themed texts in the genre (Thompson, 2011, p. 11). It is significant that Thompson’s review of various definitions, his own description of the genre, and indeed his entire book on travel writing at the time, overlook the existence of online narratives of travel. If the peripheral is generally defined by its opposition to a central or core element as something that is marginal and of relatively less importance, then it would appear that travel blogs remained incontrovertibly peripheral forms of travel writing and even while in their prime as an online genre.

The subsequently published *Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (2015), edited by the same author, dedicates an entire chapter to an examination of travel blogs as a significant form of writing travel, but the timing of this recognition is ironic, given current predictions of the demise of blogging. In this chapter, Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas approach travel blogs as a form of travel writing and acknowledge the multimodality of the narrative as well as its networked nature:

The travel blog is part of a larger category of online discourse based around a personal narrative of travel that incorporates and encompasses forms such as the travel diary, but also includes other categories of frequently updated autobiographical representation. The travel blog in this understanding extends to non-typographic modes such as the YouTube video as well as visual, photo-based platforms like Flickr or Instagram and embraces diverse forms such as the travel review or personal essay (2015).

Such a view accommodates a broader range of online narrative forms, while still emphasising personal and the autobiographical aspects of the travel account. For the authors, the subjective and introspective nature of blogging clearly associates it with other forms of travel writing. Indeed, it could be argued that blogs are well suited for the narration of travel as they are largely self-presentational texts (Van Dijck, 2004) in which authors adopt personas appropriate to the ideas and opinions they express online and through which reveal aspects of

their online selves (Hevern, 2004). This online self constantly shifts between narrative personas and much like the facile “manipulation of roles” that Holland and Huggan observe as characteristic of travel writing (Holland & Huggan, 1998). It could be argued, therefore that this distinctive technique, a generally introspective and self-focused narration of travel experiences through different personas, lies at the core of the writing of travel both online and otherwise.

The preoccupation with the travelling Self and its encounters with an exotic Other during the journey has been a key element in much contemporary travel writing. This is perhaps inevitable, for as Carl Thompson observes:

If all travel involves an encounter between self and other that is brought about by movement through space, all travel writing is at some level a record or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that it entailed...it is revelatory to a greater or lesser degree of the traveller who produced that report.... (2011).

Tracing the evolution of the relationship between Self and Other across centuries of travel writing, Casey Blanton (2002) observes that the degree of subjectivity in travel literature is constantly changing as are the roles occupied by the narrating Self, ranging from the heroic explorer of the earliest accounts of travel to the more sympathetic Romantic traveller and finally the introspective contemporary traveller whose discovery of the world outside is paralleled by an examination of the world within. The journey experience then becomes the backdrop for a negotiation of the relationship between the Self and the Other. Viewed through the conceptual lens of the core/periphery model, the travelling Self moves from the centre towards an outlying Other and each is defined by its opposition to its counterpart.

Within the context of travel blogs, the travelling Self leaves home and sets off on a journey in order to encounter the exotic Other. This journey is also the impetus for writing a blog and constructing an online Self that is defined both by the real world travels of the blogger and by his or her online journey while crafting the blog narrative. There is something of a paradox that the very act of going away that initiates the creation of a travel blog also anchors the narrative of the journey in a Home page, and that the further one travels, the greater the necessity to return to the online Home to update the account of one's adventures. Encounters with the Other include not just the physical places and persons that bloggers engage with on their travels, but also the readers and fellow bloggers who they “meet” online

as they journey through their blog narrative and other platforms such as Instagram or Facebook where they share the content of their blogs. When readers interact with the bloggers, the ensuing conversation becomes a means of discovering and defining the online self and the narrative roles occupied within the blog. This is particularly applicable for *The Gypsy Nesters* bloggers David and Veronica James, who sold their “empty nest” after their children left home and set off on a journey to “chronicle [their] discoveries” (James & James, 2017a). David James’s post on their gypsy-nesting life received a number of responses – compliments, requests to quote material, and even queries from fellow senior travellers asking advice on blogging: “Do you think a 74 year old, not ready for a wheel chair, could write a successful Travel Blog?” asks one reader, identified as Penny Watts (James & James, 2017a). Interaction with various such online Others across the blog facilitates the construction of different narrative roles that comprise the self that these bloggers wish to present online—experienced senior travellers, parents of grown-up children, retirees, published authors, and bloggers of some repute.

The blog and its authors are also defined by connections to outlying texts that refer to the narrative. *The Gypsy Nesters* lists news articles featuring the bloggers, including media appearances such as an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio (James & James, 2017b), and a list of testimonials from bloggers (*Boomerisque*), tourism representatives (Tourism Queensland) and media outlets (*USA Today*, *Huffington Post*), in an often utilised self-presentational technique that essentially constitutes what Donath and boyd term a “public display of connections” (2004) that defines an individual’s online self through a form of online name-dropping that confers a degree of status, verifies identity and ensures reliability, which in turn strengthens the reliability of their online narratives. Donath and boyd (2004) argue this network of connections both extends an individual’s social sphere as well as inscribes its boundaries. Extending this view to *The Gypsy Nesters* it could be said that the James’s display of connections both to readers such as Penny Watts and to mainstream media publications extends their online self, shaping the core text that is the blog through its links to peripheral narratives and defining who the bloggers are through their links to peripheral Others. Here it should be noted that while *The Gypsy Nesters* do not utilise the traditional blogroll to position themselves as travel bloggers or connect with likeminded others, their connections with various individuals and entities in other ways facilitates a positioning of their online personas in much the same way as a blogroll would. Furthermore,

there is a long history in travel writing of validating a narrative by “pointing to authorities outside the text” who can verify its content (Carey, 2015, p. 5).

A different style of name dropping occurs in *TravelnLass* encounters with an unknown Other from the substance of the blogger’s travel experiences. In a post about a visit to Japan, Dyanne Kruger describes how her interactions with locals in Osaka who spoke little or no English. Duly appreciative of her fellow travellers, she writes: “...my trio of middle-age Japanese “angels” couldn’t have been more delightful. Though they spoke not a single word of English, nonetheless we had such fun snapping selfies, and making our merry way to the festival” (Kruger, 2018b). Alongside, a photograph of Kruger and her fellow travellers is captioned “Who needs language when you have smiles?” Kruger’s post weaves personal descriptions and photographs of Japanese cuisine, cherry blossoms, and the bustle of Osaka, all of which help her define her online self in several ways. While her companions are unnamed strangers in the text, nevertheless they unwittingly validate her travel account and her claim, in the blog’s tag line, to being “proof that one is never too old to travel” and to being someone who “enjoys going off the beaten path”. In another post on Hiroshima and Miyajima, Kruger (2018a) takes a swipe at insensitive tourists who do not appreciate the horrors of such sites as concentration camps. Her criticism of fellow tourists as “utterly witless folks that giggle whilst snapping selfies with their friends in front of um, holding cells for innocents” is essentially an othering of the tourist, which is not uncommon in the writing of travel and the presentation of a traveller self (Kinsley, 2015, p. 239). The Self then is not defined only against an exotic Other representative of a foreign culture, as is generally the case in travel writing, but also by an othering of fellow visitors to a destination. Furthermore, as this travel account paves the way to potential interaction readers who help establish her position as a traveller and blogger, there are further unknown Others who help define her online self.

While such an outward focus on and interaction with various peripheral Others helps define both the real and the online Self for this blogger, there are also moments of introspection that are just as meaningful and contribute to her online persona. Her approach to dark tourism, she tells her readers, is much more critical and informed:

...to better understand the history of such places (or any foreign land you might visit) I often grab a book on the culture and/or history of the countries I visit, long before I actually arrive there. And for Japan, knowing that I’d be visiting Hiroshima, I opted

for an excellent (Pulitzer Prize–winning) history: *The Rising Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936-1945* by John Willard Toland (Kruger, 2018a).

While Toland certainly does not verify Kruger’s description of Hiroshima, and while Kruger does not tell us how her reading of this text guides her journey, the reference nevertheless serves to shore up her credibility as an insightful and informed traveller. Tying her own post to Toland’s text allows her to define her own blog narrative, essentially the online “home” of her travel experiences, through other narratives that lie at its peripheries and, as we understand it, guide her understanding of place. Also, as Kruger continues to travel and write, extending the peripheries of her online narrative, the self that she presents online is more clearly defined and her Home page grows increasingly complex, nuanced and richer in meaning for the writing that occurs when she is Away.

By and large, the senior travel blogs examined here suggest that the travelling Self is adventurous and enthusiastic, as evidenced by the titles and the profile pages that describe the authors. While some blogs are notably bland, such as *The Senior Nomads* or *Travel Past 50*, there are others who are decidedly more spirited such as *Gallivanting Grandma* or *Passionate Retirees*, romantic such as *Adventures of a Carry On* and *The Gypsy Nesters* or plain quirky such as *Wanderlust and Lipstick*, *Hole in the Donut Travel*, and *50 Shades of Age*, which last presents itself as “a light-hearted blog”. In general, pointed or oblique references to the age of the traveller are accompanied by a claim to some professional or personal motivation or expertise. *Boomer-esque’s* Suzanne Fluhr is perhaps among the more age-conscious of the bloggers, and writes in her profile that someone who is “Boomer-esque” is “not positive what a blog is” (Fluhr, 2018). She goes on to add, “Your eighty-something year old mother thinks you’re a genius about computers and wireless communication, but your twenty-something year old child thinks your technology questions merit eye rolling” (Fluhr, 2018). There is a touch of irony this reference to a digital divide as Fluhr is a fairly prolific blogger, with posts dating back to 2012 and is herself one of a growing number of senior travellers who are increasingly competent at using social media. In fact, most of the senior bloggers in this study reinforce their position as seniors while also presenting themselves as capable, independent and competent travellers.

Escape and social connectedness

Two concepts underpin this expression of independence and competence in senior travel blogs – escape and social connectedness. Although travel has long been framed as an

escape from the mundane routines of everyday life (Cohen, 1979), so much so that one book on the more commercial aspects of tourism refers to this as *The Escape Industry* (Tungate, 2017), some academics are dismissive of its significance, finding the concept inadequate for evaluating tourist practice (Rojek & Urry, 1997). This perspective is favoured by a growing body of tourism research that investigates the connectedness of tourists, both socially and technologically and the opportunities for social networking that travel offers (Gössling, Cohen, & Hibbert, 2016; Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2007; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2013) and argues that such social connection is diametrically opposed to the idea of travel as escapism. Still, there is some acknowledgement that while escape “cannot be literally true,” it allows for a meaningful interpretation of travel (Chaney, 2002, p. 194). Jennie Germann Molz offers a middle ground, suggesting that framing travel as escape allows travellers to negotiate their travel practices with using digital technology and maintaining social ties (2012). On the whole, amid a growing interest in travellers as connected and connecting with others, the idea of travel as escape appears to be increasingly peripheral in academic debate.

Senior travellers are by no means indifferent to the idea of escape and adventure and this is often indicated in the titles and profiles of blogs such as *Adventures of the Empty Nesters* and *Gallivanting Grandma*. For many senior bloggers, escape is facilitated by a new found independence that comes through retirement, children leaving home, and the shedding of personal and professional responsibilities in order to travel. The opening post of *Gallivanting Grandma* reads:

In 37 work-days I will retire from 30 plus years of teaching and enter the world of “retirement.” So, this is the end of my career as a “teacher” and the beginning of my life as a retired person. A retiree? A free person? A wanderer on the sea of life? Perhaps, but definitely the Gallivanting Grandma!!! (2010)

This expression of escape is a declaration of independence but also an act that anchors the online Self to a routine of travelling and posting in the blog. The intended physical escape of the real Self from a familiar space is predicated by a simultaneous fixity of the online Self.

Senior travel blogs are also significant for the new dimension they add to critical understandings of what social connectedness is and how it is practised and manifested online in the context of travel. Several senior travel blogs suggest that escape is not necessarily antithetical to social connectedness and that the two are perhaps mutually dependent. Travel as escape offers a means to connect with an unknown Other and therefore to make new social

connections that add value to the travel experience. This is certainly the case with Dyanne Kruger whose enjoyment of Japan owes much to her actual encounters with locals. Furthermore, this connection provides matter for her blog, feeds into her online self-presentation and establishes her position as a traveller. This paves the way for potential social connectedness with unknown readers and strengthens connections with her existing readership who may include both friends and family. At the same time, posting on the blog and connecting with others via various social media could provide Kruger with a sense of familiarity and routine. Connecting with others through the blog could therefore be framed a temporary escape and relief from the travel experience. For Gallivanting Grandma, on a trip with relatives to discover her Armenian roots, the trip also affords an opportunity to strengthen and perhaps extended her existing social network.

Neuhofer, Buhalis and Ladkin (2013) suggest that there are several dimensions to social connectedness among tourists who use Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as blogs and social media, ranging from social connectedness to social interaction and to social co-living. They describe connectedness largely in terms of staying in touch with home, friends and family and everyday life although they acknowledge the possibility of interaction with other tourists or tourism providers online. This social connectedness is necessary, as the authors see it, for tourists to have “a sense of attachment to home”. However, such a view tends to segregate the connectedness that occurs online from that which occurs during the actual journey. It also implies that travellers are essentially solitary and isolated, needing the security of an online social network to share the travel experience with. As several senior travel bloggers are keen to write about how they connect with locals and fellow travellers on their journeys, it is worth considering how offline social connectedness feeds online interactions.

Ultimately, travel and writing are intertwined. John Zilcosky points out that The idea that writing has a strong association with travel—first, for taking writer and reader on a narrative journey and second, because writing is made possible by travel (2008). He also acknowledges that historically writing during travel has proved difficult so that there has usually been some passage of time between the undertaking of a journey and a retelling of the travel experience. However, as Buhalis et al, (2013) point out, the use of online media in tourism tends to collapse the boundaries and gaps between travel and return and between Home and Away so that a traveller can simultaneously experience a tourist destination and share this with individuals at home who have the sense of “co-living the travel moment” (p.

348). In this sense, social connectedness within the blog offers an escape from the destination and a connection to home and familiar places suggesting that the real escape is not from Home but from an unfamiliar and uncomfortable Away.

Conclusions

Senior travel bloggers present a very different view of Home as being not so much a place to return to but for travellers like *The Gypsy Nesters* a place that can be sold, an anchor that no longer exists, which now frees them to travel. For others like *TravelnLass* who settles in Ecuador after having decided to become “a perpetual nomad, a permanent expat”, travel is about finding Home rather than leaving to discover an exotic Other. Such motivations do not fit neatly within the framing of travel as a movement essentially from a fixed centre to a distant periphery, from Home to Away. In fact, there is greater fixity of the blog that is generated by these travels so that the only real Home for these travellers appears to be the one that the online Self occupies in the blog.

In comparison with studies of backpackers and their online narratives, senior travellers have remained comparatively at the margins of academic discussion. Viewing these narratives from the perspective of the core/periphery allows for an understanding the structure of these travel blogs, the Self that senior travellers wish to present online, and what constitutes their travel experiences. Perhaps senior travel blogs are peripheral for being not so much about finding new places but about contextualising the life experiences of their authors. Perhaps they are also peripheral for being not so much about solitary travellers on a budget but about couples with a budget to travel. Perhaps they are also peripheral for being unlike mainstream blogs both in terms of their structure and influence as well as their content and style.

The peripheral is frequently associated with discourses of backwardness and exclusion and in the context of the blogosphere, seniors have been relegated to the wrong side of the digital divide. The view from the periphery, however, suggests that senior travellers can be competent users of online media and that there is a growing body of travel literature online, a repository of senior content and particularly content from the Baby Boomer generation, that offers insights into how these individuals interact and connect with each other online.

Given the limited and qualitative nature of this study, this paper can offer no broad generalisations or stunning revelations about seniors and their travel blogs. It can, however, suggest new directions and perhaps a shift in the focus of research into tourism and social media. First, that theories that conceive the blogosphere as a continuity of networked narratives that focus on conversations at the centre, driven by influencers, need to consider the very significant yet often overlooked conversations at its peripheries. Second, that while there is a very real digital divide, the increasing competency of the digital senior necessitates a rethinking of what this means for connected travellers. Finally, that given the very real growth of ageing populations in many fairly affluent nations and the growing potential for senior tourism, it would be of great social benefit to better understand the practices both online and offline of the senior traveller. Such a view from the periphery will, to use the words of Colmeiro, be more far-sighted, more curious, and more perceptive of the bigger picture of the blogosphere and senior tourism.

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