

# A Commentary on *The Case Against Travel*

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## 1 Intro

This week's post is a commentary or response or analysis of *The Case Against Travel*, a New Yorker article by Agnes Callard, published on 24 June 2023 [1]. This article is a critique of travel, or particularly of the culture of valuing travel as a universal good or accomplishment indicative of personal character or growth.

## 2 Summary

This section is perhaps poorly titled; I intend to summarize the critiques or arguments that Callard presents. First, a distinction is drawn between 'tourism' and travel with a reason or purpose. I think this is immediately somewhat disingenuous, or at least is indicative of imprecise language.<sup>1</sup> To view the article more charitably, it is an important to make distinction on the basis of purpose for travel, but doing so in the second section of the article (not the introduction), then only criticizing one distinctive part and not spending any effort recognizing the potential positive outcomes of the other groupings for the rest of the article strikes me as an unnecessary redefining of terms not conducive to genuine positive discourse. Nonetheless, the critiques of 'tourism' Callard expresses are apt.

The first is that tourism<sup>2</sup> is that it is characterized by "its locomotive character", meaning that the important part is to have been to or seen or done new things that are commonly thought of as characteristic of or quintessential to the place you are travelling to and more generally are thought of as 'high culture' experiences. Callard notes that there is a certain social shame to doing all the stereotypical 'things to do in [location]', yet people are want to do 'what one does in [location]'. In particular, Callard contends people choose to do things that are outside of their interests or ability to appreciate just because it is unique to or seen as fundamental to 'experiencing' the location to which they are traveling.

Second, Callard argues that tourists are fundamentally "deferential" in that they yearn for their experiences to be validated by experts or those seen as more experienced than them, even by social, societal, or cultural expectations for what the experience of traveling to or experiencing a certain locality should be like. A tourist "demand[s] herself to feel something", expecting to be changed or affected in a certain way by experiencing locations or events that are considered culturally significant, not being aware of or satisfied or primarily driven by one's own experiences, emotions, or observations in the moment. My interpretation of Callard's point here is that people set expectations for themselves based on cultural understandings and expectations of where they are visiting and are so frenetically expectant to be struck by a

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<sup>1</sup>I suppose this shouldn't be surprising, I suppose. Many or most of the opinion or analysis article I've read recently have misleading titles.)

<sup>2</sup>I will use this term throughout, as Callard does, both frustratingly (in that it is, at best, some significant part of all travel which is not necessarily representative of all travel or travellers' states of mind) and illuminatingly (in that it reveals Callard's true concern with travel done poorly), to speak of the careless, thoughtless mode of travel criticized in this article.

meaningful experience that they anticipate will be impactful strictly on the basis of the cultural perception of that experience that they don't allow themselves to experience it unbiasedly and draw their own conclusions by having their own independent experiences.

Finally, Callard asserts that no one is ever fundamentally changed by tourism, that we leave and return the same and, in particular, know that we will do so. That we attach so much significance to travel is, according to Callard, is an attempt to convince ourselves and others that travel is so meaningful that we will be changed. This is because we can't accept the idea of continuing always forward in life unchanged, that we use an inflated view of travel to "obscur[e] from view the certainty of annihilation."

### 3 My Critiques

In general, I think that the critiques Callard present are valid and instructive. They criticize thoughtless travel, or travel that is predicated on social pressures or socially-imposed values. I believe that there is truth to the idea that people often travel with an expectation of change or impact on the basis of the socially constructed values and want their experiences to be validated and accepted by others.

The first point is just a critique of careless travel, traveling without express purpose outside of the cultural value of travel or seeking new experiences. This is critical of poor mentality for travel more than travel itself (see the above discussion of redefinition of terms). The second point is again critiquing travel inspired by social pressures rather than by genuine desire to travel to learn or grow or experience new things. It assumes the negative motivations (again, arguably because Callard has limited her critiques to 'tourists', arguably a strawman of travel more broadly). The third argument is just quite subjective and unsupported. Naturally, this argument is true of many, (perhaps all 'tourists'), but to assert it's true across the board is a strong claim that remains unsupported.

### 4 Response

I think that this article provides some instructive critiques for a proper mentality on travel: 1) know what you're looking for, and ensure that it's something meaningful that is worthwhile 2) make sure the value you seek and take from travel is deeply personal; don't be driven by what people tell you is good or worthwhile and don't seek to validate your experiences. If a significant part of your experience or a significant source of value is telling others about your experiences, maybe it's not well-motivated. I think Callard's critique is heavyhanded and presumptive, but it is instructive, at least.

### References

- (1) Callard, A. *The New Yorker* **2023**.