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To cite this article: Jacob Henry (2019): The Geopolitics of Travel Blogging, Geopolitics, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2019.1664473

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1664473

Published online: 11 Sep 2019.
The Geopolitics of Travel Blogging

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ABSTRACT
Travel blogs are an under-utilized data repository of everyday geopolitical musings. These public, longform, generally reflexive texts allow researchers to better understand how travellers narrate their own positionality and agency within limiting state structures. Geopolitics scholars of varying theoretical and topical interests can use travel blogs as data to better understand how everyday tourists and travellers ‘live geopolitics.’ Drawing primarily from popular and feminist geopolitical insights, this paper shows how travel blogs help us to rethink questions about geopolitical authorship, especially within a digital landscape of media fragmentation. This paper also provides a case study on the geopolitical discourse of ‘border talk’ in the blogs of international volunteer teachers in Namibia.

Introduction

Namibia is a young nation … Yet, despite its youth, Namibia is a mature country—one that knows its priorities and tries its best to provide for the people within its borders … Sure, Namibia has a long way to go before it joins the ranks of many of the developed countries around the world … Yet, today [Independence Day] is not a day to dwell on what has gone wrong or what needs to be improved … Today is a day to commemorate those who gave their lives to fight against the injustices of colonialism and Apartheid so that a new generation of Namibians would live free lives. Today is a day to celebrate the diverse ethnic groups from around the country who have come together peacefully to move forward into a new era. Today is a day to recognize Namibia’s remarkable achievements!

A reader would be forgiven for thinking that the above epigraph is excerpted from a government press release or an enthusiastically patriotic opinion column in The Namibian. It was not, however, penned by a Namibian citizen nor was it written for a Namibian readership. Rather, the excerpt comes from a travel blog written by an American volunteer teacher in Namibia for her predominantly American audience. Through this post and many others, the blogger is re-presenting and re-shaping geopolitical narratives about Namibia and asserting herself as a communicator and influencer of everyday geopolitics. Travel blogs like this one – first-hand, online accounts of tourism and travel experiences – are an under-analysed site of popular and everyday
They reveal much about how embodied encounters abroad are experienced (or not) as geopolitical and reinforce the analytical position that geopolitics is not just the purview of states and agencies.

This paper demonstrates the importance of travel blogs to the study of critical geopolitics, especially as the field grapples with media fragmentation and social media representation. As tourism geographers have recognized, all travel narratives must engage in differentiating the ‘here’ from ‘there’ and are therefore quintessentially geopolitical (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019). Travel blogs proport to offer readers an insider window which may support, but sometimes challenges, the hegemonic narratives of place that proliferate in mass media.

Drawing primarily on popular, everyday, and feminist geopolitical insights, this paper argues that travel blogs help us to rethink geopolitical authorship, or who is “allowed” to write geopolitics. Individual travel bloggers – here, they are volunteer teachers in Namibia – reach a much smaller audience than other popular geopolitical media like Hollywood films. However, the blogs claim to represent reality in a much more direct way than films or comic books. Thus, the casual prose of a friendly (and often bumbling and self-deprecating) narrator may be just as impactful in shaping audience opinions about faraway places – especially places like Namibia which do not feature prominently in Western mass media. After elaborating on these theoretical propositions and describing the “netnographic” methods used to study blogs, a case study is presented demonstrating how geopolitical discourse is conveyed in personal travel blogs. Using the case study of “border talk” as geopolitical discourse (eg. Doevenspeck 2011; Lamb 2014), this paper analyzes how bloggers narrate and naturalize what Dodds calls “geopolitical architecture,” or, “the ways in which states and non-state organizations access, manage, and regulate the intersection of territories and flows” (2007, 55). Geopolitics scholars of varying theoretical and topical interests can use public online travel blogs as data to better understand how everyday tourists and travellers reflect on ‘living geopolitics’ as they participate in and narrate their explicitly transnational experience.

**Tourism Geographies and Critical Geopolitics**

The late 2010s has witnessed an insurgence of geographical scholarship seeking to join insights from critical geopolitics and tourism geographies (eg. Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Mostafanezhad 2018; Rowen 2016). Given the newness of this intellectual endeavour, many of the seminal contributions, thus far, are limited to conceptual explorations and provocations (eg. Fregonese and Ramadan 2015; Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Hazbun 2004). These scholars generally argue that “mediated relationships crafted between tourism actors can reveal the combined logics of institutions, discourses and practices … as well as help … illustrate how the ‘geo’ is ‘graphed’ in tourism by place- and space-making processes” (Mostafanezhad...
The following sections review the smaller subset of empirically grounded geopolitics literature which theorizes tourism from 1) practical geopolitics, 2) feminist/everyday geopolitics, and 3) popular geopolitics perspectives and demonstrate how travel blog research might advance each of these areas.

**Practical Geopolitics, Tourism, and Blogs**

Empirical geopolitics of tourism research often examines how tourists become witting or unwitting agents of their state. Just as the proliferation of Hilton Hotels (Fregonese and Ramadan 2015) and humanitarian volunteers (Amin 1999) have served geopolitical ends in the past, exporting mass tourists is now a state-strategy for projecting power abroad. China often features prominently in this ‘practical geopolitics of tourism’ research genre (see ÓTuathail and Agnew 1992). For example, Rowen (2016) describes encounters between mainland Chinese tourists and residents of Taiwan and Hong Kong. The locals perceive tourists to be part of a blatant extraterritorial territorialization effort: they are an unwelcome (yet, worryingly effective) embodiment of Chinese encroachment. Chen and Duggan (2016) also analyse the structural positionality of Chinese tourists, but focus on those who travel further afield to the African continent. African countries must manoeuvre geopolitically to be awarded Chinese approved destination status (ADS) in order to receive China-based package tours. Unlike in Taiwan and Hong Kong, however, the tourists in Africa do not fulfil their territorializing, soft power function. Chen and Duggan point out that tourists, “do not get to meet the locals who have no experience with China. Rather, they meet locals who have been more or less trained to meet their needs. Accordingly, the outreach of ‘Chinese ambassadors’ is actually rather limited” (2016, 54).


However, as Joseph Nye argued in his seminal thesis on soft power, “private sources of soft power” like tourists are as important for state geopolitics as they are difficult to control. These private actors may “develop soft power of their own that may reinforce or be at odds with official foreign policy goals” (Nye 2004, 17). Critical geopolitics scholars interested in
tourism as a practical geopolitical manoeuvre can use travel blogs to understand if/how tourists actually carry out the anticipated geopolitical function. Analysing blogs would allow researchers to assess whether state policy goals are being met. Such a research programme would draw on popular geopolitics insights, but could remain analytically within ‘practical geopolitics’ as it would monitor and evaluate official state policy. Travel blogs give researchers real-time insights into how the policy’s actants (Nye’s “private sources of soft power”) are implementing their “function” as geopolitical pawns and/or how they subvert the goals of their sending state. Indeed, the travel blogs analysed below contain (at times) a reflexive and troubling relationship between the sending state (USA) and receiving state (Namibia), as experienced through the position of the traveller-blogger. While there is no shortage of narratives depicting the authors as defenders and spreaders of American values, there are also oppositional moments in which American imperialism is questioned or resisted. This leads us into the (probably more fruitful) linkages between travel blogging and feminist, everyday, and popular geopolitics.

Feminist/Everyday Geopolitics, Tourism, and Blogs

Feminist and everyday geopolitics highlight the quotidian “ways in which people live geopolitics” (Dittmer and Gray 2010, 1671). On tour, geopolitical relationships become foregrounded. Spatially separated from their home state, the normality of state-specific hegemonies may be disrupted (Mathers 2010). Feminist political geographers have long argued to shift the scale of geopolitics research, noting that “relations and events are always bound up with geopolitical change … rethinking the privileging of certain analytic categories helps us to represent these relationships more accurately” (Pain et al. 2010, 980). They have also stressed the importance of “the embodied everyday experience of peoples in different locations in the world economy” (Sharp 2007, 381).

Feminist geopolitics advocates de-centring the state by investigating both transnational connectivity and microscaled experiences. For feminists, transnational analysis, “unsettles binary conceptions of politics as either global or local, central or peripheral, focusing instead on the circulation of power, identity, and subjectivity across space vis-a-vis transnational populations” (Hyndman 2004, 315). While feminist political geographers have indeed foregrounded “transnational populations,” they tend to focus on experiences of involuntary movement and forced migration, not the experiences of international tourism (Hyndman 1997; see also Mathers and Landau 2007). Yet, tourism also creates an assemblage of (intimate) geopolitical encounters worthy of examination (Mostafanezhad 2018)

The few explicitly feminist geopolitical analyses of tourism have focused on insular encounters within a single city or state. Lorraine Dowler (2013) uses a case study of walking tourism in West Belfast to masterfully draw our
attention to microscaled geopolitical practices (Dittmer 2017), through which geopolitical relationships become embedded. She shows us how former combatants can shape tourism into a process of re-telling and reconciliation. In contrast, Diana Ojeda (2013) uses a feminist geopolitical analysis to theorize “banal securities” which states use to secure territory in the name of (domestic) tourism and safety for travel. Unlike the reflexive peacebuilding in Dowler’s study, Ojeda teaches us how the Colombian military uses discourses of security and peacefulness to legitimate an ever-increasing presence of checkpoints, soldiers, and firearms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, tourism – that vast conceptual beast – can be deployed to both legitimate and de-legitimate state violence.

More research is needed to understand this interplay and the transnational nature of geopolitical discourses and intimacies (Mostafanezhad and Norum 2016). Critical tourism scholars have long thought about how to gather this kind of transnational data. Tourists are, by definition, ephemeral and liminal (eg. Bruner 2004). In order to better understand the always-in-motion tourist, researchers sometimes turn to “netnography,” or analysis of the online archives written (mostly contemporaneously) by tourists. This has included analysis of longform blogs (eg. Stainton 2018) but also of shorter texts like TripAdvisor reviews (eg. Iqani 2016; Mkono 2011). Travel blogs in particular hold great potential for scholars of geopolitics, especially those invested in feminist perspectives.

The very writing of the blogs contests masculine forms of agency-centric geopolitical authorship. Feminists often seek to better understand how, “international representation [is linked] to the geographies of everyday life ... [and] the ways in which the nation and the international are reproduced in the mundane practices we take for granted” (Dowler and Sharp 2001, 171; see also Massaro and Williams 2013, 567). Travel blogs have no shortage of mundanity. This is not a slight on the bloggers’ prose, but rather an observation that the “mundane” when visiting a new place becomes highlighted. On tour, if mundane activities are not totally extraordinary, they at least become notable. Conveying that Namibia “has this” or “does that” becomes a staple narrative as the tourists navigate a completely unknown yet eerily familiar world.

The blogs are also attractive resources from a feminist geopolitical lens because they are epistemologically grounded in place. They exemplify geopolitical “knowledge production as a partial view from somewhere” (Hyndman 2004, 309). Rather than approaching their geopolitical insights from a self-evident gods-eye perspective, the bloggers only have authority because they convey a partial view from somewhere. In this sense, the blogs are a thematically feminist text: the blogger’s subjectivity, personality, and often bewilderment shapes the geopolitical epistemologies which can only arise out of this experience. The blogs are a “resolutely ‘grounded but translocal’ perspective of what everyday geopolitical life is” (Dittmer and Gray 2010, 1667).
Popular Geopolitics, Tourism, Blogs

While the delineation between feminist/everyday geopolitics and popular geopolitics is deliberately blurry, the latter generally requires analysis of how popular media influences geopolitical discourse. According to Dodds, popular geopolitics research considers how, “political life is fused with the mass media and, second, the different kind of media involved in producing and circulating images of global politics whether it be television, radio, and/or the internet” (2007, 7). Notable investigations into popular geopolitics have focused on the geopolitics of comic books (Dittmer 2007), James Bond films (Dodds 2006), celebrity humanitarianism (Mostafanezhad 2017), and newspapers (McFarlane and Hay 2003). There is surprisingly little research into the popular geopolitics of internet-based mediums. Though Dittmer and Dodds (2008, 445) identified the, “growing importance of activities such as blurbs, blogging and threads using online platforms” more than a decade ago, few political geographers have explored this avenue of research. Dittmer and Bos (2019) recently renewed their call for investigations into social media, blogging, and the internet. This article responds to their call by highlighting the importance of online travel blogging as a form of popular geopolitics.

Fortunately, much research from cultural studies and critical tourism studies has addressed popular geopolitics themes, just without the ‘geopolitics’ label. For example, scholars have studied how tourism bureau representations of place – especially in the Global South – often reinforce colonial geopolitics (eg. Albers and James 1988; Calkin 2014; Cornelissen 2005) which have circulated in the transnational milieu since colonists first packed their cameras (Bollig and Heinemann 2002). Other scholars have examined how travel-based television shows script geopolitics. For example, Hubbard and Mathers suggest that the television program Survivor Africa, “illustrates the way America imagines its relationship to Africa and itself … offering a model of power relations between Africa and the United States” (2004, 445). Some travel programmes also serve as platforms for self-critical and oppositional narratives (Henry 2017). At least one study – Mostafanezhad and Promburom’s (2018) investigation into “film-induced tourism” – explicitly identifies itself within the media-tourism-geopolitics nexus. After the release of a wildly popular Chinese comedy film set in Northern Thailand, tourism to the region exploded. The authors found that the increased tourism encounters allowed for a re-articulation of geopolitical imaginaries which challenged the “over-determined views” of both hosts and guests (cf. Amir and Ben-Ari 1985). In this case, popular media catalysed thousands of individual, personal geopolitical investigations and revisions through tourism.

Recent scholarship in the cultural studies of tourism and travel has also begun to explore the geopolitical effects of internet-based content. For example, the widespread online parody of the humanitarian/development
industry has reshaped how some development volunteers approach ‘overseas service’ (Schwarz and Richey 2019). Additionally, viral internet videos may now be as effective as Hollywood in promoting specific geopolitical causes. The widely shared Kony 2012 video produced by the missionary group Invisible Children explicitly called on American policymakers to rethink non-interventionism in Uganda but also (inadvertently) launched critical public debate about representations of Africa (Shringarpure 2018).

Internet research generally, and blog-based research in particular, do not simply expand the scope of popular geopolitical case studies. Rather, they recommit scholars to the popular in popular geopolitics. Much popular geopolitics research to date seeks to illuminate “The Media’s” foray into geopolitics. From this vantage point, “media producers (firmly established within the agency-centered model of discourse that has been dominant within critical geopolitics)” are given primacy in popular geopolitical scholarship (Dittmer and Gray 2010, 1670). One gets the (not entirely incorrect) sense that geopolitical media is produced in boardrooms not dissimilar to a Pentagon war room. Films, comic books, and most of popular geopolitics’ main subjects are all products of editorial decisions (sometimes made in collaboration with the Pentagon (Dodds 2007, 152)). However, in the age of the social internet, most “media” never goes through this editorial process. The travel blogs analysed below are not pushing an institutional agenda but instead emerge out of spontaneous and uncensored (popular!) observation and reflection. This is not to suggest that there are no genre conventions which may limit the bloggers’ imaginations. Indeed, self-narrations of international volunteering often draw on familiar literary arcs (Tomazos and Butler 2010). However, the blogs are wide-ranging: genre conventions are frequently set aside when describing routine happenings in Namibia. Mundane descriptions of dinner in one paragraph may be followed by reflections on global racism in the next. The possibility for popular geopolitical enquiry which both supports and opposes the sending state remains open.

**Study Methods**

The remainder of this paper presents a case study of geopolitical discourse in travel blogs. It uses the sample described below to analyse discourse about one topic of interest to critical geopolitics scholars: borders. Political geographers have long understood that borders are part of a “geopolitical architecture” which is essential to “manage, and regulate the intersection of territories and flows and … establish borders between inside/outside, citizen/alien, and domestic/international” (Dodds 2007, 55). Thus, when the bloggers write about borders and bordering processes, they engage
(intentionally or not) with a much larger geopolitical discourse about the constitution of differential states and citizens.

**Geopolitical Border Talk**

Political geographers have conceptualized the phenomena of “border talk” to understand the everyday geopolitics of borders. Doevespeck (2011), for example, writes about border talk along the Rwanda-D.R. Congo border. He shows that people on both sides tend not to question the intrinsic nature of borders or demand an officially open border so long as they can utilize the political cleavage and unauthorized crossings for personal ends (see also Dobler 2009). Lamb (2014) adapts the concept to expand beyond residents’ narratives about living on a border. Studying the Thai-Burma border, Lamb explores how border residents abstractly conceptualize the border. She also studies official state discourses which are presented during a series of hearings about hydropower on the border-river (see also Pickering 2010 for border talk in a newspaper). The following sections examine how the bloggers’ reflections depict specific borders and bordering processes in southern Africa and how they support and/or oppose border regimes generally. Due to space, only a single case study is presented; however, the travel blogs hold insights on a multitude of geopolitical topics. There is plenty here for future research.

**Netnography**

The qualitative data for this study was gathered from online blogs of volunteer teachers in Namibia. “Blogs” in this study are periodically updated online texts over which an author has complete editorial control. Many of the blogs are hosted by intuitive, click-and-drag platforms like Blogger or Wordpress. The volunteers use their blog platform for a variety of purposes including: storing memories, relaying musings from Namibia to friends and family, and creating a supposedly cross-cultural dialogue with home (Banyai and Glover 2012, 268). Internet blogs are part of a (limited) digital globalization in which information dissemination cuts across (most) state borders (Youngs 2009). All of the blogs analysed here were composed by a single individual (not co-authored) and were complete (the volunteer was no longer working in Namibia). Namibia was chosen because it is the site of the author’s ethnographic projects and the author was previously, briefly a volunteer teacher in the country.

Blogs are commonly used by scholars to analyse the discourse of highly mobile populations (e.g. Stainton 2018). The blogs, unlike a private social media account or personal listserv, are publicly available online: the blogger understands that unknown readers may access their writing (Snee 2013, 147; Stainton and Iordanova 2017). Since the bloggers have knowingly
“published” a public text, the blogs are treated as “texts with authors” rather than interviews with informants (Mkono and Markwell 2014). However, in order to provide some confidentiality – albeit largely symbolic – direct quotes are attributed using a pseudonym (Kozinets 2006).

This project employed “static-word netnography,” which analyzes text freely available on the internet (Blichfeldt and Marabese 2014). This is an unobtrusive form of research and avoids what is commonly referred to as the Hawthorne Effect – the change of subject behaviour due to the presence of the researcher’s gaze. The traveller’s blog, obviously, presents itself in the exact same way to the blogger, her family, strangers, and the online researcher (Bosangit, Hibbert, and McCabe 2015, 4). Blog posts allow the researcher to access the blogger’s “impressions, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings” and to capture the chrono-development of discourse without longitudinal ethnographic or survey research (Banyai and Glover 2012, 268). This article emerges from a larger blog-based qualitative analysis project of volunteer teachers in Namibia. For the project, the researcher analysed 14 blogs totaling 307,143 words for a variety of themes related to education, tourism, and humanitarianism. The data for this study was evaluated using “directed content analysis” which allows the researcher to derive codes from a prior research question, rather than as a solely interpretive process (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1282). This approach is most effective at illuminating specific enquiries like the bloggers’ interactions with and ponderings about borders. The blogs were analysed in their entirety; however, given the topic of my case study, special attention was given to posts with a high probability of border talk (like posts written before and after crossings). A content search for terms related to borders was also conducted and yielded additional excerpts. These usually did not refer to border experiences or analysis but rather described Namibia as a (bounded) entity (i.e. “Namibia takes care of people within its borders”).

**Case Study: Border Talk in Travel Blogs**

The bloggers’ border talk is most prominent upon arrival to Namibia, departure from Namibia, and during school holidays when many volunteers go on overland trips around southern Africa. Doevenspeck suggests that border talk should be pooled into “narrative clusters, as an aggregation of individual border stories that contain similar views … to emphasize the primacy of certain thematic plots and reveal those aspects of the border that people prioritize and the meanings they give to it” (2011, 140). Following this advice, the volunteers’ border talk is presented in three such clusters: entry, crossing, and exit narratives.

This paper takes a broad perspective on “the border” an entity. It is concerned not only with physical borders, but also with bordering processes and the imaginative geographies of “here” and “there.” As Alison Mountz writes, “borders are increasingly characterized by movement rather than
stasis ... they are reproduced ... as legal and bureaucratic entities where migrants and advocates struggle over policy to negotiate entry and exclusion” (Johnson et al. 2011, 65). This perspective lends itself to the growing literature on the borderwork assemblages which make legible spaces-as-needy and legitimate humanitarian endeavours (Hyndman 1997; Pallister-Wilkins 2018). In this sense “border talk” moves beyond literal borders to also engage reflections on mobilities as stimulated by movement across borders.

**Narratives of Entry & Availability**

There is a problem at the border! The Namibian Ministry of Education has not submitted the volunteers’ work visas before their arrival to the country. As they approach the immigration desk at Windhoek airport, the volunteers are anxious about the prospect of being detained or expelled from Namibia. There is, however, little actual risk since North Americans are allowed a 90-day tourism visa upon arrival, with almost no questions asked. One volunteer later blogs about the situation:

> Since we hadn’t yet received our work visas for Namibia we were instructed as a group to check in at customs as ‘visitors’ and to all give the same address of residence. Officials quickly got suspicious, berated us, accused us of lying, but eventually let us off pretty easily. Such a situation sheds light on how arbitrarily things are run in Africa, though. Often governmental certifications and decisions are dictated as much as a matter of playing by the rules as they are by breaking the rules (Liam)

The volunteers were ultimately allowed to cross the border, without proper documentation, validating their faith in a geopolitics of cosmopolitanism and belief that “globalization” has created, “a traversable world – a world not of borders, but a space of flows, a world in motion” (Cunningham 2004, 330). The volunteers never interrogate whether they have a right to be in Namibia or what their smooth border crossings mean within the milieu of the geopolitics of mobilities (Hyndman 1997). After months of travel preparations and correspondence with sending organizations (and in some cases paying thousands of dollars), the volunteers have faith that Namibia will be available to them and that their passports will be sufficient to carry them across the border.

While the volunteers are confident that their bodies can move through borders, they are less sure that their baggage, often carrying the tools of humanitarianism, will make it. Most of the volunteers’ entry border talk narrates worries about luggage and the perceived maliciousness and incompetence of African airline workers. These concerns aid in the epistemological bordering work needed to legitimate humanitarianism. Within this bounded space, humanitarians are needed to serve supposedly chaotic and disorganized Namibian systems. For example Noah writes:
So, we had caught our flight to Namibia and the only thing left to worry about was immigration – we had been warned. But we all got through without a hitch and waited at the baggage carousel … Yeah you guessed it, no bags. We left the airport after 2 and a half hours of waiting, went to our accommodation and were reassured by our Country Representative – “Oh, Jo’burg [Johannesburg, South Africa] is the worst place to lose your bags. Doesn’t matter if you have padlocks, they have all sorts of dirty tricks.” Comforting.

While this may just seem like a racist stereotype (and it is) it is also a validating mechanism for the volunteer who will, in part, provide moral education against crime. Even when volunteers show less outright animosity, lost baggage at the point of entry remains exemplary of African “need.” The competent and confident North American volunteer with a powerful passport and a planetary consciousness can move through time and space unbounded. However, the non-sentient luggage may fall victim to Africans and their “dirty tricks.” Hailey, a volunteer who was returning to Namibia for a second year of teaching, wrote of her baggage woes:

Of course both bags had to arrive in perfect Namibian fashion: things take time, but in the end it all manages to somehow work out. Waiting a week for my first bag, and two weeks for my second did cost me a fair amount in phone calls, frustration and time, but eventually, both bags DID make it here-whole and in tact! The final lost- and now found- bag had all of my gifts for learners, incentive prizes and classroom material. I was so desperate for it to be recovered. I feel as though a huge weight has been lifted off of my shoulders now that everything that was meant to join me is now here!

The lost bag contained the tools of humanitarian cosmopolitanism, namely gifts for her students. Experiencing (or even just worrying about) lost bags, helps convince the volunteer that Namibian society does indeed need education and rationalization. At this early stage, the volunteers’ interaction with borders, does little to challenge the hegemony of the nation-state. They do not reflect on the right to move or their positioning within a “small social stratum of ‘cosmocrats’” (Shamir 2005, 197). Upon entry, the volunteers cite the logistics of crossing as evidence of African deficit (Pieterse 1992). They write the political geographies of humanitarianism in Africa as existing within a cleanly bordered world. “Here” and “there” are easily distinguished, and investigations into the interconnectedness of social fields is clouded by lived crossings, materialized passport stamps, and (ritualized) emotive fear of baggage handling.

Narratives of Crossing

During school breaks the volunteers often travel throughout southern Africa; this brings them into contact with international borders (usually with Botswana and Zambia) at overland border posts. Unlike entry narratives, crossing narratives relay a completely embodied encounter in which the
volunteer quite intentionally steps out of Namibia, walks through the borderzone, and enters a neighbouring state. This time volunteers are travelling solely as tourists and must rely on their whiteness, citizenship, and relative wealth (not humanitarian intentions) to carry them across. It is also more likely that volunteers will witness “regular Namibians” trying to cross (to visit family and conduct petty, yet, transnational commerce) at these overland posts than at the polished customs desk of the international airport (Mathers and Landau 2007). While the movement of goods and people is not particularly restricted at Namibia’s (northern) borders (Brambilla 2007), many Africans are diverted towards informal and sometimes dangerous crossings. Here, privilege is laid bare as the volunteers are allowed to move freely while the crowd of Africans around them are postponed and diverted to more dangerous routes (see Zeller 2009 for a holistic depiction of the multi-level, cross-border activity at the Namibia–Zambia border).

One experience that is sure to produce border talk is crossing a border on foot. Grace describes how she intimately experienced the “no-man’s land” between states

We grabbed our bags and went into the customs office to fill out the first of many exit/entry forms. Once those were stamped and processed, we headed to the crossing. Having never crossed a border on foot, I was surprised at how long it was. Seriously, the no-man’s land between Namibia and Botswana was about one kilometer. I came to find that this was fairly typical.

Another volunteer finds humour in the crossing – perhaps an indication that he expects all international borders to be highly militarized and motorized spaces:

the three of us each paused at the question regarding mode of transport through the border. None of the options above applied to us, so we all chuckled as we checked the box for “other” and wrote on the space provided “footing”. Then we proceeded out of the office, past a boom gate, and into the no-man’s land between the two nations. (Dan)

The wonder that footing it through a border generates is partially attributable to the straightforward surprise North Americans experience when lines on a map are, in fact, not contiguous. However, this surprise also must be read within the imaginative political geographies of Africa. Kathryn Mathers writes that African space is often perceived as, “a space of nothing” – a place where “state constraints of border posts, passport controls, and customs fall away, and … namelessness is underscored through action” (Mathers 2010, 87). In contrast, the volunteers narrate their embodied experience with land crossings more complexly. The geopolitical relations between Namibia, its neighbours, and the US passport become foregrounded. Africa-as-entity is politically differentiated.
At overland border posts, the differentiation of mobilities is on full display. In the same moment as a Zambian trader is canoeing his goods across the Zambezi, our blogger may be enjoying the “momentary threat [of borders which] soon becomes an amusing anecdote to tell friends and family back home” (Mathers and Landau 2007, 523). The volunteers meet people who live in the border towns and whose movement is officially restricted. However, they generally hitch rides with relatively elite Africans (like government officials and Afrikaners on business from South Africa) who also have little trouble moving through SADC border posts. When the volunteers do encounter long-distance taxi drivers who can only take them “up to” the border, there is little reflective energy given to the forced immobility experienced by these individuals.

However, even as the borders cause some amount of friction in the volunteers’ otherwise hypermobile world, geopolitically imperial implications are often avoided. A quote from Dan encapsulates this point well. At the end of a long blog post narrating the tribulations of ground-travel, he writes about crossing into Mozambique:

the more different places you see, the more you learn how all human beings are the same everywhere … It’s the more fundamental motivations, desires, and emotions that we seem to all share … even one of the border employees, after we explained that we did not have the currencies he needed in the amounts he needed, rubbed his head and took a deep sigh, obviously resenting the fools in front of him that were making his job more difficult [but let us pass]

Well, that’s enough philosophizing, I’m hungry. (Dan)

Dan’s blog also includes observations like USAID stickers on Zimbabwean border guards’ computers and simple geopolitical commentary like Zimbabwe is a “country with which the US of A is not on the best of terms.” However, before he can unpack the specific politics of borders and how they relate to his personal experiences, he cuts the reflection off with a “humorous” deflection.

**Narratives of Exit and Boundaries**

As the volunteers conclude their humanitarian tenure and prepare to leave Namibia, border talk reemerges in their blogs. At this stage, Namibia is constructed as a socially and culturally bounded entity, completely separated from the volunteer’s home in North America. The border talk depicts Namibia as a development field that humanitarians can exit but also remains available for their return. For some volunteers, leaving Namibia signals the end of a liminal stage of their lives. Their blogs imply that once they exit across the border, their connection with Namibia will end. This sense of finality is received with melancholy by some like Dan who blogs:
In a week I will part with [village] and its people, *probably for the rest of my life*, but I am fortunate enough to have gained the possession of memories, thoughts, and a few friends with which I hope to never permanently say goodbye. (my emphasis).

Other volunteers are more eager to leave Namibia and go “back home”:

It’s very strange to think that it’s now a matter of days, not weeks or months, until I’m back home with my friends and family (and caramel wafers & bacon butties). I have had such an incredible year, with so many good times and a few challenging ones as well. I’m sure than [sic.] when I return, everyone will notice me much changed (for the better I hope!) (Noah).

Regardless of whether the volunteer is eager to return to North America or not, their depictions reify global political geographies as easily defined and distinct.

Their final weeks at the host schools is generally an affective time for the volunteers and many respond to the difficulties of leaving with a declaration of intent to return in the future. This discursive manoeuvre is a clear example of the intimate geopolitics of mobility – a return to “the field” – remains a possibility for the volunteer; however, mobility for their Namibian colleagues and students is rarely considered. This creates a tension between the volunteers’ oft espoused goal “to inspire others to live cosmopolitan, hypermobile lifestyles” (Jakubiak 2017, 204) and the desire to rhetorically cement Namibians as part of a permanently available “field” in which to enact humanitarian geopolitics.

Some volunteers attempt to use technology to revise the geopolitics of mobilities. One volunteer writes that he has, “gathered some email addresses to stay in contact with the school and staff, [and is] keeping [his] class rosters to remember names” (Dan). Another volunteer describes a similar plan:

I hope that someday I will be fortunate enough to return for a visit, but until then, I will have to be satisfied with facebook contact, a million happy memories, and pictures of my learners’ smiling faces looking down at me from my classroom wall. (Grace)

However, the possibilities of digital transnationalism like email and social media are perhaps a bit lacklustre for Namibian colleagues who are still stuck with their “bad” citizenship (cf. Ong 2003; Sylvain 2005). The volunteers write about many injustices they observe in Namibia (racism, sexism, colonialism, occasionally even structural adjustment), but none of them use blog space to reflect on the injustice of immobility. Rather, the restrictions on easy movement are generally accepted as an inherent part of the Namibian reality. In an emotional blog post reflecting on her “legacy,” one volunteer identified some problems of immobility but avoided theorizing even basic solutions:

I wanted to leave the school with … something that would act as a symbol for the work I tried to do to broaden the horizons of my students during my service. I decided to paint a map of the world, visible from nearly every angle of the school grounds … I hope that the map is a reminder that if my students have the
ambition and curiosity to venture beyond their realities, education can truly be their window to the world ... Yes, the world is large. I realize just how lucky I am to be fully aware of its diversity and immensity. Most people in the world are not so lucky ... the world they see, the world they know, does not extend beyond their immediate realities. I hope that, by my being here, I was able to help satiate my students’ desire to learn about the peoples, cultures, landscapes and animals from different corners of the globe and, in some way, make their worlds just a tiny bit larger. (Chloe)

Even though Chloe seems to genuinely desire mobility-for-all, she recognizes that her map can only be a “window” to the world. Chloe’s map serves as a way for rural Namibians to see beyond their bounded “field” but does nothing to increase mobilities. None of the volunteers write about plans to help *individual Namibian friends* cross borders, let alone advocate for open borders more holistically. There is no talk, for example, of helping Namibian colleagues apply for university admission and scholarship, which might be the easiest path towards disrupting the standard directionality of humanitarian geopolitical flows (Hyndman 2019).

Further evidence that exit-stage border talk discursively positions Namibia and Namibians into a static “field” comes from the volunteers’ narratives of return. Most volunteers hope to return to Namibia in the future. For example, Emma writes, “Wow. I cannot believe that two months has passed. It feels like it has only been two weeks. But it doesn’t matter because I know that I am coming back one day.” However, for Emma and many other volunteers, the blogs provide no evidence of any return trips to Namibia. It seems that only a few volunteers remain hypermobile enough to return. When these volunteers come back to “the field” they inevitably find that places changed while they were away and that their humanitarian impact is largely forgotten due to the high turnover rates of students and staff in rural Namibian schools. One volunteer blogs,

> though coming back to [village] had certainly felt a bit like coming home, I was coming home to a place where I didn’t exactly belong anymore. Of course I knew that things would not be the same as when I was there the first time, but the feeling of not really having a place in the village life anymore was a startling one ... Though the learners who knew me were excited beyond belief to see me, most of the learners at the school had no idea who I was, and it was like being in the village for the first time again (Grace)

Grace ultimately decides to cut her homecoming trip to the village short. Rather than reflecting on the dynamism of the village and how that challenges her conceptualization of “the field,” Grace decides to fly back to the capital city to “feel a lot more at ease [and] give [her] some time to do a few things in Windhoek.” Chloe, the volunteer who painted the map, also returned to her host school. After coming to terms with the fact that the village is ever-changing and not a timeless “field”, Chloe writes,
though I hope to cross paths with some of my students in the future, I know that the chances of ever seeing them again are slim. Before gathering my belongings and walking the sand tracks toward the bus stop and away from the school, I hugged my students and vowed to stay in touch. Only this time, I didn’t promise to return. This time, as the bus rolled away from Ondangwa and back toward Windhoek, I sobbed quietly—letting the tears streak down my cheeks and knowing, deep down, the finality of my goodbye.

Not only do these return trips tend to demoralize the former volunteer, but they also produce a sense of finality. After these trips, the conceptual distance between Namibia and North America is amplified, the two seem even more separated than before. While the volunteers who returned may continue to live hypermobile lives, their blogs seem to indicate that Namibian memories are frozen in the past. The popular geopolitical analyses from the perspective of embodying US-Namibia relations becomes archived and static. Returns are thus an integral part of the bordering processes reified by bloggers’ narratives – they exist as finality, not flow.

**Conclusion**

Travellers’ accounts have long contributed to geopolitical discourses. We might reach as far back as the notorious Ibn Battuta whose travel reports and embellishments helped to shape the geopolitical positioning of contemporary kingdoms and economies (Fauvelle 2017). More than half a millennium after Battuta, travel writing continues to engage geopolitics. Today, there are modern day Ibn Battutas who send dispatches about their professional travels through the internet (Azariah 2016). There are professional travel bloggers, whose prose reaches a much wider readership than the bloggers/volunteers analysed here. This professional group remains undertheorized as geopolitical actors, despite some of their most popular posts being explicitly (everyday) geopolitical (e.g. Wandering Earl 2017). Professional bloggers, however, like old media are sponsored by corporations and are at least somewhat beholden to advertising. In contrast, the bloggers examined in this paper narrate ‘other places’ without explicit editorial supervision. Such text is valuable to anyone interested in popular geopolitics as it de-centres ‘expertise’ in all senses: the volunteers are not expert authors, nor expert ethnographers (and not even expert teachers). Their narratives are truly popular – not because they somehow exist outside power relations, but instead because they demonstrate what is ‘knowable’ when the broader geopolitical discursive milieu collides with intensely personal on-the-ground experiences.

This paper provided a case study of ‘border talk’ in the online narratives of international volunteer teachers in Namibia. The bloggers provide an ‘everyday’ perspective on the geopolitics of mobility and borders. The inherent violence of borders and the hegemony of the state remains elusive to these liberal, well-
meaning North American travellers. Their interactions with state borders can be sorted into three broad categories: entries, crossings, and exits. The narratives depict a world in which borders yield to U.S. passports and whiteness allowing the travellers to experience unfettered movement, even as they present the wrong currencies and paperwork. However, the blog platforms are not used to advocate (to their American readership) the merits of a politics of free movement for all. The case study supports the main arguments that travel blogs are an under-utilized data repository of everyday geopolitical musings.

Travel blogs – by generic convention – are accessible texts. The prose is conversational and the blogger – themselves, constantly in the process of learning – guides readers through simple (though not always typically hegemonic) interpretations of place. In contrast to conventional, carefully edited official geopolitical narrations, the bloggers write the world casually. They almost certainly do not see themselves as geopolitical authors, however if their readership is to properly understand their adventures and tribulations, some amount of geopolitical context is surely required. The blog-as-medium can help re-commit the still new field of popular geopolitics to analysing popularly-produced texts. Dwelling in this geopolitics-tourism-blogging nexus promises to yield many empirical and theoretical insights for future scholarship on how people live and write geopolitics. Scholars working on the geopolitics of tourism have established the rhizomatic proliferation of travel as geopolitical embodiment. The geopolitics of travel blogging takes this one step further, prioritizing the proliferating polyvocality of tourists and travellers as they ‘geo-graph’ their experiences.

**Acknowledgments**

Reece Jones and Mary Mostafanezhad first got me thinking about the themes discussed here. Borjana Lubura, Foley Pfalzgraf, Ashley MacDonald, and the anonymous reviewers all made this article better. A previous version was presented at the 2019 Political Geography Pre-Conference.

**Funding**

No funding and nothing to disclose

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