

From Volunteer Tourism Toward a (Cosmo)Politics of  
Solidarity

by  
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# Introduction

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I remember the day my mind shifted.

I was 15, quiet, with hair pulled back in French braids, wide eyes, and a malleable mind. At the persistence of my mother, I found myself at a youth conference at a small Unitarian church in southern Ohio. Unbeknownst to me beforehand, the conference theme was “social justice,” so in a mesh of social activities and workshops, we were exposed to topics ranging from recycling to the School of the Americas. Though the weekend was transformative on many levels, the only thing I remember clearly was watching *Hotel Rwanda*. Even as the details of the movie and the Rwandan genocide that it documents fade, I remember the worn maroon plaid of the couch, the bowls of kettle corn lying untouched in front of us, and the muffled sound of my friend Jeremy crying next to me. I remember, or perhaps I just cannot forget the feeling that spread over me. I cannot forget the day I learned to yelp.

*To yelp: open your mouth. Convulse your stomach, as you would before a belch, or before vomiting. Now, form a word, a thousand words, but emit none. In place of the words you might attempt, make a sound. It is sudden, high-pitched, angry. It speaks of the stupidity of pain. This is exhaustion. Shock in the face of a landslide. Brutality. A flood. Machetes. You did not think you could be surprised or overwhelmed, but you have been proven wrong. You did not think, after seeing some ten thousand murders on television, after reading so much*

*history, that anything could stick its fists through you. But you have been proven wrong. You did not want to be proven wrong.*<sup>1</sup>

I think it was the feeling of powerlessness that spread over me. The violence, the thousands dead, the tears- these were horrifying to watch- but these were also so often white noise: the news broadcasting in the back of the restaurant, the blockbuster war movie, or the headlines. No, it was watching the apathy on the part of people like me: of my government, the UN, non-profit organizations, institutions I thought I believed in. No one was doing anything. I gasped for air, smothered by the crushing weight of the revelation that through their inaction, I was implicated in the horrors before me.

*The yelp is efficient. The yelp says a great deal with great economy. The words, questions and statements that are encompassed in one quick yelp: Fuck! Shit! Piss! How could you? How could you? I won't believe it. Stop it now. Please stop it now. Oh God. Oh God. Motherfuckers! Animals! That poor man. Those poor women. I cannot believe it. I will not believe it. Those bastards. Those motherfucking bastards. This is not how it should be. Nothing should ever be like this. Goddamn all this. I give up. No, I will fight. No, I will give up. No, I will fight.*<sup>2</sup>

Clutching tightly to my friend with one hand, a pillow clasped to my chest, I could barely suppress my urge to rise to my feet, pick up a phone, *do something*. Of course, I did not, I could not, but oh my God. Oh my God.

*Oh my God.*

In the extended version of *When they Learned to Yelp*, Dave Eggers (2004) writes that yelping can be done far from the source that provoked it (208). And for those “Americans of a certain age,” when they did learn to yelp, most of them did it

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<sup>1</sup> Eggers, Dave. 2004. "When They Learned to Yelp." In *How We Are Hungry*. San Francisco: McSweeney's. 208.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 208-209.

from afar. Part of living within the shaded reality of middle-class life in the United States is having the luxury of choice to live a life free of yelping. We can turn off the TV, close the newspaper, end the conversation. Or not.

*Yelping cannot be practiced or forced. Yelping will come only when provoked.*<sup>3</sup>

I do not think Jeremy and I are the only ones who learned to yelp that way. I do not think it is strange that we cry out for something we know only through a thirty-two inch box. Instead, it feels more like a crack in the layer of alienation that covers us, the unnoticed indifference that becomes the terms of our day-to-day survival and engagement with the world. Like a fracture on an icy pond extending out in all directions, affect pushes through a culture of disaffection.

*Those who have yelped have had their floor removed from them. The floor falls away and the yelper descends between 300 and 1500 feet, down a narrow shaft. Then the yelper must make his or her way back again, to the light.*<sup>4</sup>

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Jeremy and I came home brand new. We were horrified, paralyzed, powerless. But also, responsible, unwavering, determined.

We could not stop asking *What should we do?*

We created a website. We spliced together heart-wrenching photos, statistics, and a John Lennon song into a public service message for the morning announcements. We made necklaces. We sold them during lunch hour. We made \$62.37 and we sent it to the Save Darfur Coalition. As 15-year-olds in Dublin, Ohio,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid 207-208

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 209

it was close to all we could do. It was not much, but it was not nothing. *Un granito de arena*, one grain of sand.<sup>5</sup>

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Sometimes my cheeks turn crimson at this memory. Sometimes I am struck, more than anything else, by the arrogance and naivety of our actions. But usually there is something in these early moments that I cannot turn away from. It is not so much our “good intentions”<sup>6</sup> that I argue are redeemable, but rather the desire and willingness to engage in the first place. I am still struck by the beauty in feeling so deeply for the suffering of others, in feeling so called to act. I am still inspired by this intersubjectivity “in which each of us is always, already responsible for others,” in which our lives with others are “inherently entangled in responsibility” (Rose 2004:13). What I first identified only as injustice, I learned later to call neoliberal globalization, transnational capitalism, or “neocolonizing postmodernism” (Sandoval 2000:iii). Thinking structurally and intersectionally uncovered more injustices, their relation to one another, and often, my implication in them as an American citizen with socio-economic, racial, and educational privileges.

Still coming to understand my location in an interconnected world, I find resonance with the ethics of connection that Deborah Bird Rose (2004) proposes, through which “moral responsibility is one of the most important forms of action we can take in a world in which our humanity is under assault” (14). Knowing that notions of responsibility, and the attempts to help that follow them, are often

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<sup>5</sup>*Granito*. 2011. Dir. Pamela Yates.

<sup>6</sup> For here, I tend to agree with Ivan Illich’s (1986) argument that “good intentions have not much to do with what we are discussing here. To hell with good intentions. You will not help anybody by your good intentions” (2).

paternalistic and counter-productive does not shake my belief that we are "mutually implicated humans whose primary duty is to respond to others" (Rose 2004:13). Instead, it inspires me to interrogate what responsibility *actually* means. What sort of consciousness "can intervene in the forces of neocolonizing postmodernism" (Sandoval 2000:iv)? What can or should "taking action" mean?

I know too, that such openness to problems outside of one's own immediate social milieu requires disposable time and energy. Yelping for others may not only represent an abundance of benevolence or selflessness, but also an abundance of privilege. From the comfort of the middle-class and the endlessly expendable energy afforded to a student at an elite liberal-arts university, we are able to ask *What should we do?*

I am still asking *What should we do?*

The "we" and the "do" in this question get to the heart of my project. I know that James Ferguson (1994) counters my question with another question: just who is the "we" I am talking about (282)? No doubt, it is crucial to be specific. The "we" I am interested in are those of us who have the disposable time and energy to yelp for others. The "we" I am interested in is myself, and people like me: part of the American professional middle-class, a group of people who by virtue of their citizenship and consumption habits are complicit in a world of harm.<sup>7</sup> A group of people who by virtue of their education, their nationality and their class status hold

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<sup>7</sup> I could easily expand this category to Western middle-class subjects more broadly, for there are numerous convergences to be found. However, having never traveled outside of the Americas I feel ill-equipped to speak to these realities. I focus instead on subjectivities within the United States because it is here that my personal experience lies.

immense power.<sup>8</sup> I am interested in those of us with the privilege to form our identity around being a helper. The “do” in question is more nebulous, as what we helpers choose to do can encompass everything from purchasing “ethical” products to protesting the G-20 to volunteering abroad.

This project is about the politics of acting from a place of privilege in a deeply unequal world. Focusing on “selfless” volunteering undertaken by middle-class Americans, I notice how the unadulterated desire to help the world can become commodified, simplified and mass-marketed. I interrogate the possibility that “helping the world” can be problematic, paternalistic, and even outright harmful. In the face of all this, I consider the transformative potentials of what already exists and what could be, and continue to ask: *What should we do?* I ask knowing that the question might be better put *What should we stop doing?* and that there is a “possibility that there will be no need for what *we* do” (Ferguson 1994:287).<sup>9</sup>

### **Politics of Voluntourism: “A Criticism of Scintillating Leaps of Imagination”<sup>10</sup>**

Whether we are raising money to save Darfur or planning for a black bloc,<sup>11</sup> the ground we, middle-class Americans tread upon is slippery. From helping to philanthropy to assumed solidarity, many models in the pursuit of social

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, the bounds of this “we” are by no means unproblematic. There is no unified or discrete category of “people like me.” I write then about a “we- who are not the same... we who are many and do not want to be the same” (Rich 1986:17).

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> From *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings* (Foucault 1988:326)

<sup>11</sup> A black bloc is a protest tactic, often associated with anarchist demonstrations, in which demonstrators wear black clothing in order to act as a unified front. While black blocs can be a very effective tactic for confrontational demonstrations, they are also subject to substantial criticism. Many argue that because black blocs often incur strong police intervention and repression, they are inaccessible to more marginalized populations including, but not limited to: women, trans and queer people, differently abled people, people of color, and people without class privilege.

transformation reproduce power relations and inadvertently preclude transformative change. Indeed, critiques of such unskillful models permeate through activist and academic circles. And in an environment like Wesleyan University, in which critical analysis spills out of the classroom and into our personal and political lives,<sup>12</sup> thus magnifying the smallest oversight in self-awareness, most engagements are met with harsh appraisal. So with each passing day in this critical environment, I distance myself more and more from the urgency to “save the world” that I felt at 15. I problematize my outrage, my sadness, my persistent attachment to the problems of the world. I call myself arrogant for placing the whole world on my shoulders or for thinking that my actions can or should matter in the slightest. In both activist and academic circles I have been trained to think (logically) before acting or not to act at all, but to analyze and write and speak.

This climate at Wesleyan has been as formative to my thought and action as was yelping at 15; and my initial thinking about the globe, transnational activisms and transnational mobilities was quickly overwhelmed by critique, paralysis and hyper-awareness of my own social position. Indeed, almost as soon as I had begun "thinking globally," I had begun to critique the various ways that the mainstream middle-class Americans I encountered interacted with this notion. I criticized tourism, study abroad, and volunteering on both domestic and transnational fronts, hyperaware of the constant danger that these actions might deepen existing power hierarchies. I felt righteous in my refusal to participate in these practices and invested instead in deeply local actions. I was convinced that it did not matter how or why I traveled, because

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<sup>12</sup> Which of course, are far from two separate things. I echo commonly espoused insight in feminist theory and praxis that “the personal is always political.”

ultimately my body was just one of many other white bodies, moving from the Global North to the Global South, using it for my own ends and desires. Good intentions, careful planning or nuanced engagement felt irrelevant next to long-standing histories of violence and power.

I was deep in this critical frame of mind when the *New York Times* article “For Those Who Aid Others, ‘Tourist’ Doesn’t Tell The Whole Story” (2006) introduced me to volunteer tourism.<sup>13</sup> Volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, is a relatively new form of travel, which aims to combine “the relaxation of a standard vacation with the rewards of volunteer work” (La Fon 2009). Marketed as a chance for travelers to “go a little deeper” than they might as mere tourists (MacNeille 2006), voluntourism trips promise the combined benefits of authentic tourism (the chance to make meaningful connections with locals, language practice, intercultural exchange and a world perspective) and volunteer work (personal satisfaction and the opportunity to help the “less fortunate”).<sup>14</sup> Though combining service and travel is nothing new, volunteer tourism did not become broadly recognized as an industry and practice until the 1990s in conjunction with booming study abroad and gap-year programs (Clemmons 2011). Volunteer tourism has since emerged as a fast-growing and increasingly profitable niche within the alternative tourism industry and the non-profit sector (Clothier 2010).

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<sup>13</sup> Throughout this project, I use volunteer tourism and voluntourism variously to signify the same thing: trips that bring together service and leisure.

<sup>14</sup> ““Volunteer Abroad.” A Broader View, accessed March 6, 2012, <https://www.abroaderview.org>; “International Volunteer Projects.” Volunteers for Peace, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://vfp.org>; “Volunteer Abroad Programs.” Cross-Cultural Solutions, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org>.

Amused and slightly repulsed by the contradictions of the phenomenon, I wrote a short response paper for my Anthropology and the Political Economy class, applying Marcel Mauss' The Gift (1923) to volunteer tourism trips. "Well intentioned as they may be," I concluded, "voluntourism trips, like other unreciprocated gifts, reinforce paternalistic power dynamics, in this case between the Global North and South." The practice was almost too easy to criticize.

In its original proposal, my thesis had a similar intention. I planned to articulate an unforgiving critique of one particularly egregious middle-class engagement with the globe: international volunteer tourism trips, a set of practices both problematic and paradoxical. This remains an integral part of this project, for in the face of practices like voluntourism, criticism can be a necessary intervention. But like everything, critique must be done carefully. I fear, for I have seen it in myself and in those around me, that all too often critiques of this sort can stop engagement altogether. Whether the outcome is paralysis, guilt, apathy, or hopelessness, I take strong issue with critique that does not take responsibility for the end results it yields. Instead, I use voluntourism and my ethnographic investigations of it as a point of entry into a larger meditation on the politics of global engagement. This project is informed by a deep commitment to action, self-reflexivity, critical reflection and intentional slowness.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Stewart (2007) writes: "to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us" (4). For more, see Stengers 2005 and Stewart 2007.

In trying to write about voluntourism responsibly, I draw inspiration from the words of Michel Foucault (1983):

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep.

... I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms. [326]

With this in mind, two revisions in particular are essential, both as part of and in conjunction with a critique of volunteer tourism trips. First, to treat these trips not solely as problematic practices, but as Foucault suggests, as “signs of existence,” requires attention to the sentiments and social context that surround voluntourism trips. Using my personal familiarity with the desire to help and know the world, I begin by discussing “the voluntourist at home,” or the social conditions that inspire participation in volunteer tourism trips. Second, according to my reading of Foucault, “a criticism of scintillating leaps of imagination” necessitates a deep engagement with and accountability to its subjects and must be intimately committed to envisioning alternative potentialities. To this end, I conclude this thesis by imagining the possibilities for solidarity across and beyond borders.

### **(Field)Sites In and Outside of Voluntourism: Context and Methodology**

In 2011, I spent July and most of August in Peru doing ethnographic fieldwork on two volunteer tourism trips. For ten days, I stayed in Cusco while volunteering with the organization A Broader View. The remaining three weeks were

split between Piura and Tambogrande, where I participated in a “work camp” coordinated by the US-based organization Volunteers for Peace. Both programs exemplified the hybridization of tourism and service, yet neither of the programs defined themselves clearly as volunteer tourism or voluntourism. Although I began the project with voluntourism as my specific focus, I found that it was not feasible to base my study on programs that marketed themselves explicitly as voluntourism because these programs were always much more expensive, ranging from \$1,500 to \$5,000 for two or three week trips. My limited research budget necessitated that I chose more inexpensive programs with a less prominent tourism component.

Once in the field, I discovered that though they were not specifically marketed as volunteer tourism, both trips I participated in had strong emphases on cultural tourism and leisure. In the line of Ivan Illich (1986) who referred to short-term volunteering trips as "mission-vacations" (2), I continue to use the term voluntourism because it draws attention to the unequivocal centrality of the volunteer and her satisfaction in short-term volunteer work. Through this choice of language, I claim that short-term volunteering in the Global South is inherently intertwined with tourism.<sup>16</sup>

These five weeks in “the field” were central as both evidence and inspiration, and the specifics of these sites require explication to contextualize the vignettes that follow. The two trips embody some of the variety that exists amongst volunteer tourism programs. The first program was facilitated by an organization called A Broader View Volunteers (ABV), which specializes in short-term volunteer

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<sup>16</sup> At the end of chapter one, I describe in more detail the emphasis on tourism I encountered in both of the programs.

vacations. Though ABV has programs in 18 countries around the world, the program in Cusco is one of the most popular programs, due to the city's proximity to Machu Picchu and other historic sites.<sup>17</sup>

The ABV program placed a strong emphasis on the support, comfort and satisfaction of the participants. Volunteers lived in home-stays with upper-middle class families, in which they were guaranteed their own room and three home-cooked meals a day. All volunteers interfaced regularly with Christina, the local county coordinator, who was responsible for meeting volunteers at the airport, arranging their volunteer placement, Spanish classes and home-stay accommodations, and coordinating leisure activities in the evenings and on weekends. Christina was in constant contact with the ABV staff in Wyncote, Pennsylvania and was required to photograph volunteers throughout their trip, from the moment they arrived at their home-stay to their last day playing with children in the orphanage.

A Broader View prioritized flexibility, allowing volunteers to choose the exact dates and duration of their program, so while volunteers crossed paths in home-stays and weekend trips, one's experience was deeply individual. All of the volunteers I met were working in orphanages around Cusco, though rarely side-by-side. Due to its emphasis on flexibility and comfort, the ABV program was on the expensive side- the program fee ranged from \$895 for one week, to \$1490 for two months, though Christina told me that the average duration of a volunteer's stay was two to three weeks. Most volunteers also took Spanish classes for an additional fee.

The second trip differed substantially in structure, cost, emphasis and content. I found the program through the organization Volunteers for Peace (VFP). Unlike my

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<sup>17</sup> "Volunteer Abroad." A Broader View, accessed March 6, 2012, <https://www.abroaderview.org>.

experience in Cusco, there were no local Volunteers for Peace staff managing the specifics of the program. Instead, VFP connects foreigner volunteers to locally based organizations, in this case, Peru SonQoiKipy.<sup>18</sup> An independent group leader, Teresa Cárdenas, planned the specifics of the program with little input from either of the organizations. The more hands-off approach by the organizations meant that volunteers took on more responsibility for their experience, finding their own way to and from the airport, cooking their own meals, and taking a more active role in planning their volunteer work.

The volunteer work consisted of teaching English and planning games and activities in two elementary schools. We spent the first ten days in Piura, living in the extra room of Teresa's house and working with children in the neighborhood school. During the final week we traveled to Tambogrande, a smaller town about an hour from Piura, where we slept in an extra classroom and continued to provide the same English lessons and activities. This program was more cohesive and group-oriented, with a specific start and end time and mandated group leisure activities. The cost of the program was less than that of A Broader View. As Teresa explained, the program fee was broken into two parts: \$300 went directly to VFP, while an additional fee of \$279 funded the program, including food, lodging, some transportation and a recreation budget.

Through my fieldwork I was simultaneously a researcher and a volunteer. I formally interviewed seven volunteers and three program staff members about their reflections on the programs; however, the majority of my research came from

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<sup>18</sup> According to the group leader, Teresa Cárdenas, Peru Sonqoikipy translates from Quechua to "Peru Of Our Hearts"

informal conversations and shared experiences. As an active participant in the programs, I was able to build strong friendships with some of the other volunteers, which made ethnographic research challenging, yet fruitful. Through these relationships I got to know the volunteers as they were, thick, complex, and like all of us, full of contradictions. Thinking of myself as another volunteer, rather than an elevated ethnographer precipitated a shift in my own thinking and deepened my experience. During a Skype call I made from Piura, a friend from home, familiar with my politics, asked me laughingly: “Do the volunteers know that you’re judging them?” Though she said it in jest, it stopped me short. We hung up and I lingered in the sunny street outside the Internet café for half an hour, scribbling in my notebook:

*I do not want to write a critique of a problematic practice. I take seriously the anthropological tenant of withholding judgment. It is unavoidable that there will be critical aspects of my work, yet, I am determined that this project will go beyond that.*

This intention became more and more central to my project as the weeks passed and as my perceptions of voluntourism thickened. I write knowing that as a young, white, middle-class American who would have happily been a voluntourist given the chance, I was an insider even before I began this project. Rather than liberating me from the politics of representing my subjects, the commonalities between me and the other volunteers “enhances my sense of accountability and responsibility” (Fink-Shapiro 2009:13). So like Ivan Illich (1986), I write “as a [sister] speaking to brothers and sisters” (1), with acute awareness of my own embeddedness in that which I study.

While these ideas guide the moments that I speak about other volunteers, my concerns about representation were magnified when it came to describing interactions with the trip coordinators, host families, and particularly, people unaffiliated with the

programs. While I interviewed several of these actors in Spanish, and had frequent conversations with people I met by chance, their voices are not the focus of these pages. Given my positionality and limitations as a researcher, I make no attempt to represent the realities, experiences or perspectives of any of the Peruvian people I met. My concern is not that they cannot speak, but that I lack the knowledge and experience to hear or understand them (Ulysse 2007:1 in reference to Spivak 1988). I focus instead on the relational interactions between local Peruvian people and volunteers to analyze the formation of the volunteers' subjectivities and perspectives. By elucidating specific interactions with specific individuals, I aim to avoid creating generalized representations of both volunteers and local Peruvians.

Knowing that all ethnographic truths are partial (Clifford 1986:7), I attempt to write reflexively, as a "mode of academic activism," to "interrupt the problem of ethnographic authority that arises when the focus is only on the subject" (Ulysse 2007:6). With the cognizance that my positionality, personality and politics are never absent from my observations, descriptions and conclusions, this project contains autoethnographic components through which I locate myself explicitly (Reed-Danahay 1997:9). I am interested in using autoethnography as a mode of "writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bouchner 2000:739). Particularly as I endeavor to delve into the affective dimension of these trips, I use my experience as a volunteer, tourist and ethnographer as a point of entry, which can offer a thicker description than standard ethnographic methods might. As Ellis (2000) writes, "the stories we write put us into conversation with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices and

values... the text is then used as an agent of self-understanding and ethical discussion” (748). Aiming to connect my personal experiences to the cultural phenomenon I study, these pages are a constant conversation between theory, experience, reflection and feeling. Even as my voice wavers, I strive to keep it present.

This project is also informed by experiences outside of these two voluntourism trips. Indeed, my field site was never discrete, nor bounded by space and time. I anticipated interfacing exclusively with the two organizations I worked with, but instead found myself in the middle of a vast network of local and international organizations, which crossed paths and competed in multiple sites. Volunteers, tourists and voluntourists were everywhere and everyone else had something to say about them. Consequently, I kept my notebook close, even in between trips, often chatting with strangers on the buses and in the streets about their thoughts on volunteer projects and tourism. Back home in Middletown, Connecticut, conversations with friends and acquaintances about their experiences abroad kept my reflections in motion, lending me insight, questions and inspiration. Finally, in order to discuss the social context that can give rise to an identity as a “helper” or an aspiring cosmopolitan, I draw from my own memories and experiences. While I may not have intended to write a multi-sited ethnography, it could not have been otherwise.

I am informed by the work of Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) who argue that the uncritical spatialization of home and “the field” furthers a picture of a world made up of discrete, separate cultures (14). Perhaps, Gupta and Ferguson

suggest, “in an interconnected world, we are never really ‘out of the field’” (35). Today, these pages incorporate ethnographic and autoethnographic analysis and reflections spanning eight years and three countries. By engaging in a temporally fluid and ongoing multi-sited ethnography, I aim to draw attention to “the interlocking of multiple social-political sites and locations” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:37) that constitute a practice like voluntourism.

It is also crucial to note that by virtue of these multiple sites and my hesitation to speak for or about realities that I lack enough time to attempt to know, this is not an ethnography of voluntourism in Piura or Cusco in particular. I do not claim to be able to analyze the way that volunteering projects fit into or materially affect these places, but rather the way that volunteers interact with and construct them. I acknowledge that in this way my ethnographic methodology can seem to mirror the lack of attention to local specificity commonplace amongst volunteers. Still, I believe that this is a necessary framework. Cusco and Piura are located on opposite sides of Peru and are distinct in history, culture, foreigner presence and geography, rendering them unsuitable for direct comparison. Thus, beyond the nationalistic imaginary that binds such distinct places together, and equally significantly, the way that Peru as a nation is constructed in the imaginations of foreigners,<sup>19</sup> I can speak very little to the specific relationship between the volunteering programs and the local communities I interacted with.

Acknowledging these limitations clarifies my focus. In this project, I am interested in the construction of the cosmopolitan helpers who participate in these

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as I will discuss further in chapter two, volunteers on both trips described their process of choosing Peru in identical language, with the same assumptions about what they would find.

trips, the ways that the volunteers I met interacted with the different scenarios and the moments of possibility that emerged along the way. Through this focus I affirm the value of studying what you know and of “studying up,” (or at least “across”) in order to interrogate “the culture of power” (Nader 1972:289).

While more cognizant of my positionality and limitations as a researcher, this focus on the volunteers is not without its problems. Even in writing a critical ethnography, I am concerned about falling into the common trap of using Peru as a “backdrop for Westerners’ adventures and discoveries” (Mathers 2012:16). During my fieldwork I attempted to reconcile this dilemma by engaging as much as I could with the locality I was in- asking questions, conversing about Peruvian history and politics, and paying extra attention to the ways that volunteers imagined and constructed Peru. On a personal level, I believe that I learned a lot, yet I am equally cognizant of the problems with the belief that some reading and five weeks in Peru enable me to speak about the place with any authority (Mathers 2012:27). The specific scope of this project demonstrates that this project “is only the beginning of an inquiry, not the end” (Ferguson 1994:xvi) and there is ample opportunity for further study of volunteer tourism trips from different angles and methodologies.

### **Theoretical Influences: Cosmopolitanism, Development and Humanitarianism**

Voluntourism is an amalgamation of the desire to see/know the world and a will to help less privileged Third World others; thus, my theoretical influences treat these respective impulses separately, bringing together the anthropological literatures on cosmopolitanism, development, and humanitarianism. Because I am interested in

voluntourism as a *world-making project*, cosmopolitanism is an apt starting point for making sense of the values that inspire participation in global aid, for understanding the problematics inherent in such an ethos and for imaging its possibilities as a liberatory framework.

For Immanuel Kant (1784) to be cosmopolitan meant to be a citizen of two worlds (Beck 2002:18), simultaneously an active participant on the local level and a member of “a worldwide community of human kind” (Rapport 2006:23). In more contemporary work, this conceptualization remains present. Indeed, Pnina Werbner (2009) argues that new work on cosmopolitanism “attempts to theorize the complex ways in which cosmopolitans juggle particular and transcendent loyalties- morally, and inevitably also, politically” (2). Defined by this balancing act, cosmopolitanism is generally discussed as a perspective, or a mode of managing meaning characterized by a willingness to engage with the world (Hannerz 1996:102).

Anthropologists have made significant contributions to debates around cosmopolitanism, noting both the convergences and the tensions between cosmopolitanism and the discipline (Colson 2009; Hall 2006; Rapport 2006; Werbner 2009). Cosmopolitanism has been considered as both a colonial ideology that is just another “expression of Western hegemony” (Hall 2009; Werbner 2009:13) and as a utopic vision of hope for a better world (Notar 2008:617; Werbner 2006). Bolstering the former characterization, cosmopolitanism was originally conceptualized as accessible only to elite, mobile Westerners (Hannerz 1996:103), while others have revised this idea, positing a vernacular cosmopolitanism, embodied by “non-elite forms of travel and trade in a post-colonial world” (Werbner 2009:14). From an

anthropological perspective, theorists have proposed the necessity of the cosmopolitan “dialogic imagination” (Beck 2002:18) for “treating the global and the local not as polarities but as mutually implicated principles that influence relations and identities across boundaries as well as within them” (Rapport 2006:23). Concurrently, some have cautioned that cosmopolitan claims to a universal humanity can overlook structures global power and transnational inequalities and the fact that currently “differences of power and resources override the interconnectedness” (Hall:345-346).

Used as an intervention into contemporary discussions on globalization, cosmopolitanism zooms in from analyses of shifting cultural, political and economic flows to locate the individual and her thoughts, feelings and actions in this increasingly interconnected world (Notar 2008:617; Beck 2002:37; Rapport 2006:23-24). As a student of anthropology, I find this attempt enticing, as it attends to both the texture of individual experience, and the structures and processes in which the individual is entangled. I uphold the value of this multi-layered focus and aim to foreground the individual experiences of my subjects who, while ever-embedded in larger global processes, also retain the potential to subvert and transform them. Given this focus on the individual, it is important to consider the question that Ulrich Beck (2006) raises: “Subject to what limitations and by which actors are certain cosmopolitan principles translated into action” (22)? This question weaves through this project and in answering it I treat cosmopolitanism as a space of both peril and possibilities. Through these chapters, I contextualize cosmopolitanism, critique it, and attempt to reinscribe it with new meaning.

I am equally interested in analyzing the ways that volunteer tourism trips, as one form of “helping,” are embedded in existing power relations. In order to address this, I look to critical anthropological literature on development and humanitarianism. Voluntourism, like its components, tourism and volunteering, also depends on a pre-existing difference between the First World and Third World. This division of the world into modern and developing regions (Pletsch 1981:567; Escobar 1995) justifies the existence and work of the international development industry, whose purpose is to develop the so-called Third World through various means, including industrial development, the tourism industry, and poverty alleviation programs. There is a vast political, economic and anthropological literature on development discourse and interventions. Walt Whitman Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1971) laid out a classical modernization paradigm, arguing that only by following the capitalist trajectory of the “First World” nations could the “Third World” realize development. This perspective was subsequently challenged by political economy critics, such as Andre Gunder Frank (1992), Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1979) and Enzo Faletto (1979), who argued that capitalist development in the core regions of the world caused the underdevelopment of peripheries, thus that underdevelopment was not an original condition, but a result of exploitative integration into the capitalist world system. Taking this critique further, many anthropologists critically engaged the modernization paradigm and challenged the very premise and existence of the development industry as a power/knowledge system. Works such as those of Arturo Escobar (1995), Gustavo Esteva (1992), James Ferguson (1994), Wolfgang Sachs (1992) and Aradhana Sharma (2008) deconstruct the discourse of development and

show how it is used to construct specific identities for Third World nations and people and to exercise power over them. The harshest critics have called for an end to development altogether (Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Sachs 1992), while others have noted the possibilities for development as a discourse of entitlement (Cooper and Packard 1997). However, in this project, I am most interested in critical development literature as a tool for marking and making sense of the “interpretive grid through which the impoverished regions of the world are known to us” (Ferguson 1990:xiii), and in the practices that arise from that characterization. While not always defined as conventional “development,” voluntourism trips rest on developmentalist presumptions about the world and are informed by many of the same limitations, problems and possibilities.

Humanitarianism is yet another axis of volunteer tourism. Building on the conviction of a common humanity,<sup>20</sup> humanitarian action is discussed as a responsibility or a duty to relieve suffering and preserve human dignity (Terry 2002: 17). As such, claims of the necessity and inherent value of neutral humanitarian action are commonplace (Redfield 2005; Terry 2002: 18). Given that it is termed as an *imperative* and responds to moments of catastrophe and devastating suffering, critical takes on humanitarianism have been slow in coming.<sup>21</sup> Still, in recent anthropological work, humanitarianism has been discussed as a space of contradiction, paradox and tension (Bornstein 2001; Fassin 2011; Feldman 2007).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy, though perhaps unsurprising, that this “common humanity” is analogous to that at the core of cosmopolitanism. Perspectives on cosmopolitanism offer insight into the problematics and possibilities of the humanitarian ethos, challenging the assumption of a universal humanity untainted by power hierarchies while maintaining its value as a utopian vision. I will delve more into these ideas in chapter three.

<sup>21</sup> See Minn 2007 for a detailed review of anthropological work on humanitarianism.

<sup>22</sup> Also Redfield 2005, 2011; Terry 2002; Ticktin 2006.

Whether by virtue of its insistence on remaining impartial in moments laden with history, power and politics (Redfield 2005; Tickin 2006), its focus on short-term alleviation defined by comprising long-term solutions (Feldman 2007; Terry 2002) or its potential to “magnify and reconstitute economic disparity” (Bornstein 2001: 614), many have claimed that humanitarianism is far from neutral in theory or praxis. Because volunteer tourism borrows from humanitarianism in both ethos and practice, I build on the perspectives of those who critique it for its apolitical mission and tactics, which nonetheless have deeply political effects (Bornstein 2001; Tickin 2006).

Neither humanitarianism nor development map perfectly onto the peculiar space of voluntourism, so I apply these ideas carefully and conscientiously, highlighting the moments where voluntourism diverts from or complicates these frameworks. Rather using them as points of direct comparison, I employ these literatures for their moments of ideological continuity with my subject matter, as well as for the critical questions that they raise.

Finally, I am strongly influenced by radical critiques of “helping,” in particular Ivan Illich's "To Hell With Good Intentions" (1968). Originally given as an address to the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects (CIASP) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, Illich wages a scathing critique of the paternalism and irresponsibility of American youth volunteering for a summer in Latin America. Illich expounds on the inadequacy of good intentions, the imperial implications of such "benevolent invasions" (2), and the harmful unintended consequences that volunteer presence can enact. In conclusion, Illich implores the prospective volunteers in his audience to

“recognize [their] inability, [their] powerlessness, and [their] incapacity to do the “good” which [they] intended to do” (5). I read “To Hell With Good Intentions” (1986) long before I began writing and his words stopped me in my tracks. Later, I became interested in taking Illich’s conclusions a step further. A question that has remained central in my mind is that which my friend Melody articulated: “How can Illich’s insights be a point of departure rather than a point of conclusion?” One way or another, Illich’s words found their way into every chapter.

### **Mapping Trajectories**

Through the opening vignette of this introduction, I positioned myself and expressed my personal investment in the questions this project addresses. This context serves as a starting point to thicken the “good intentions” that Illich (1986) discusses and to articulate some of the problematic aspects of the cosmopolitan helping impulse. Building out, I investigate the ways that a cosmopolitan sentimentality translates into action, with voluntourism as my central focus. Through thick description of my experiences and interactions as a voluntourist, I observe the many moments that bolster critical perspectives on transnational engagement as well as the ones that complicate them, in order to consider the troubling implications of voluntourism trips in conversation with the sentiments that undergird the question *What should “we” do?*

In chapter one I delve more deeply into the nebulous “we,” the background noise, and the cultural context within which voluntourism trips are located. I explore the concept of identity formation through oppositional identification to think about

how alternative ideas of self come to be. I analyze the ways that middle-class Americans aspire to a cosmopolitan identity as a form of distinction from the mainstream. This world engagement can take place through consumption practices, travel, humanitarianism, or the striking combination of these: volunteering tourism trips. Using Josée Johnston's (2007) theoretical analysis of the citizen-consumer hybrid proposed by ethical commodities, I analyze the degree to which volunteer tourism trips function for the benefit of participating volunteers rather than the communities they claim to serve.

In chapter two, I zoom in on volunteer tourism trips. I begin by deconstructing the common query: “Are voluntourism trips effective?” by analyzing the promises espoused in promotional materials from the two trips I participated in. Noticing the rhetorical centrality of the volunteer having a meaningful experience, I consider volunteers’ perceptions of the work they undertook. I reflect on my own reactions to the volunteer work, to comment on the pervasive assumption of volunteers’ inherent utility. Next, I dive into the literatures on development and humanitarianism to locate voluntourism in the tangled landscape of international aid. Building on these theories, I examine the ways that such trips are constructed to exclude dialogue on structural inequalities and political issues. I analyze the ways that in spite of this erasure of history, context and politics, voluntourism trips are situated in a deeply political space and can enact and perpetuate existing hierarchies of nationality, race, and class. Finally, I employ the work of Marcel Mauss (1923) and Marianne Gronmeyer (1992) to note the “elegant power” (53) inherent in “help” and gift giving.

Chapter three is an exercise in imagination and reintegration. Given my commitment to responsible critique and action, I scrutinize the trips I participated in for the fleeting moments of possibility that emerged. Using these moments as inspiration, I attempt to articulate a radical cosmopolitics (Fornari 2004), which maintains a continuous openness to the world (Kahn 2002), while emphasizing the pressing need to act and move carefully. I contemplate the possibilities and limits of “global thinking” and the politics of solidarity across borders. I begin and end this project with the conviction that there is beauty, power and necessity in feeling bound to the lives of others, and even more so in feeling called to act for and with others, in order to build a different kind of world and *buen vivir*, or living well, for all people (Esteva 2012).

# Chapter 1

## The Voluntourist at Home: Global Imagination and Practice in the Professional Middle Class

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2:25pm. Andrea and I slammed our lockers shut, and trampled down the stairs. We stopped along the way to chat with passing friends and teachers, empowered by the small pleasure of moving slowly without worry of missing the bus, feeling older than our 15-year old bodies made us appear. On a normal day, our yellow buses departed at 2:30pm sharp and we didn't have this luxury; but this Tuesday, Andrea's mom was picking us up. The van doors slid open at the touch of a button and we hopped into the climate-controlled, leather interior.

From the tinted windows of the purple mini-van, I could see the familiar landscape pass us by. Dublin, Ohio. Unique only in its obsession with Irish-kitsch, the fast-growing city of 38,000 epitomizes the sprawling Midwestern suburb. The endless scene of newly built neighborhoods, chain restaurants, Wall-marts and the occasional industrial farm inspired a common conversation. Andrea and I were talking, as we often did, about our contempt for our high school, for Dublin, for the United States. Today was an exception, because this chatter wasn't so detached from action—we were headed to an information session about a youth trip to “Africa.”<sup>23</sup>

Though Dublin offers middle-class white families the American dream in all its glory, growing up in the suburban Midwest made us feel deeply isolated from “the

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<sup>23</sup> That we referred to our potential destination only as “Africa” is indicative of the homogenized conceptualization we held of the “Third World” broadly, and Africa in particular.

World,” in the broad sense of our young imaginations. This perceived isolation had fostered in both of us a strong curiosity about “the World,”<sup>24</sup> and a desperate desire to leave the concrete sprawl that had comprised our social universe up until that point. We were ready to get out, even if just for two weeks. And what better excuse than going to help the “less fortunate”! Hollywood films like *Hotel Rwanda* had showed us an Africa that was in desperate need of our help. Fueled by a strange mix of self-interest and selflessness, we were unconcerned about the history or politics of the destination country, the length of the trip, or the specific volunteering activities we would participate in. Knowing next to nothing, not even where in Africa we would be headed, we walked through the door, already aspiring voluntourists.

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*“The sheer number and variety of opportunities available can make it difficult to choose... Follow whatever tugs at your heart”<sup>25</sup>*

Within trips referred to as “voluntourism,” there exists considerable diversity in length, emphasis, type of volunteering, and location, which allows the aspiring voluntourist to craft their ideal experience (Clemmons 2011; Clothier 2012). In the chapter, I argue that the emphasis by trip providers on building your own experience, privileges the volunteer over those she is supposedly helping. On the trips I participated in, it was not an interest in Piura, or even Peru that brought volunteers on the VFP program to that location, but rather, a blanket interest in the “Other,” the

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<sup>24</sup> In the coming pages, I refer to “the World” as such because in practices like voluntourism, in which opportunities to visit and aid are lined up next to each other like shampoo brands in a supermarket, it is “the World” that is marketed, erasing the specificity of the host destinations.

<sup>25</sup> Claire Newell, voluntourism advocate, quoted in “Voluntourism: Seeing and Serving the World” (2009).

foreign, the far-away and the needy. Indeed, most of the volunteers I spoke with had put minimal thought into choosing a destination location and knew almost nothing about Peru before arriving. In promotional materials, locations across continents are marketed side by side. A Broader View proclaims that “flexibility is key” for their programs, as “volunteers choose their own project location, program dates, length of stay and in some locations, [their] accommodations.”<sup>26</sup> The organization offers volunteers the chance to “Find Your Ideal Program” asking “Where do you want to go?” above a list of 20 destination countries, and then “What do you want to do?” followed by 16 types of volunteer work, ranging from “Indigenous Community” to “Sea Turtle Conservation.”<sup>27</sup> Analysis of promotional materials highlights that while there may be three sets of actors in the theater of voluntourism, the gains of the volunteers, in terms of what Pierre Bourdieu (1986) describes as cultural capital, and the gains of trip providers, in terms of economic capital, take precedence over the benefits accrued by local communities. This chapter examines the social conditions, which facilitate the development of an interest in helping “the World” among middle-class American youth, and how the voluntourism industry, among others, builds on, enhances and exploits these desires for profit.

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Andrea and I never made it to Africa. Her dad nixed the idea as “dangerous” and my parents did not have the \$2,000 dollars plus airfare to invest in that sort of “learning experience.” Our disappointment was palpable, but there were a host of

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<sup>26</sup> “Volunteer Abroad.” A Broader View, accessed March 6, 2012, <https://www.abroaderview.org>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

other opportunities, so we moved on quickly. Today, I am grateful that our plans fell through. Most everything about our way of relating to “the World” at that point in our lives makes me cringe, for our attention was superficial, our actions hasty, and our reflexivity non-existent. But although the actions we considered may have been problematic, I have retained some continuity with that 15-year old self, namely a strong interest in seeking to understand the world and how I fit into it, an appreciation for active political and social engagement, and an earnest belief that the world can and does change. It is precisely these values that I would like to address in the pages to come, with attention to the social context that can enable their formation and the options for engagement that are presented to those who acquire them.

My flirtation with volunteering in Africa is but one thread in a larger mesh of experiences, desires, backgrounds and actions about and in the world. The central characters in the stories I tell here are young, middle-class, white Westerners who think and act globally. There is Max, a 19-year-old aspiring firefighter who came to Peru to help with a building project at an elementary school. There is Catherine, who adds volunteering and traveling to her Facebook interests. There is Mary, who agonizes over whether going home for Christmas is worth the carbon emissions. There is me at 15, crying over Hotel Rwanda, and me at 18, protesting the War in Iraq on the streets of Washington DC, and me again, at 21, writing my thesis about voluntourism trips and the politics of middle-class youth engagement with global issues. And there are so many others like us. I cannot start talking about voluntourism

in Peru without talking about these stories, for these are the positions from which I write and about which I am interested in theorizing.<sup>28</sup>

In this chapter, I define these positions as aspiring cosmopolitanism, building on and revising Ulf Hannerz's (1996) classic definition of cosmopolitanism as "an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other" (102). I argue that for middle-class youth in the United States, cultivating a cosmopolitan identity is a form of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) marking those who embody it as alternative, ethical and distinct from the imagined American mainstream. I trace some ways that young aspiring cosmopolitans in the United States are taught to know and act in the world, ranging from lifestyle choices at home to travel abroad and the ways that this global orientation serves to mark their distinctiveness from mainstream and average Americanness. In all of these cases, cosmopolitan engagement is cultivated by the consumption of global goods and experiences, thus it is firmly located within global capitalism. As Josée Johnston (2007) notes, "ethical" consumption, which aims to aid the "less fortunate" around the globe is in tension with consumer goals and profit-motivated capitalist exchange. I will apply Johnston's theoretical work to the central commodity analyzed in this project: the two voluntourism trips which I participated in, noting the ways that these trips reinforce a vested interest in the volunteer above local communities.

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<sup>28</sup> Though their names are changed, these are all people I have met, some during my time in Peru, some in the United States. The experiences listed here are but moments in rich, ever-evolving lives. I speak of their stories as they recounted them to me.

## **Distinction Through the Consumption of Difference: Aspiring Cosmopolitans**

It was another Thursday at Dublin Scioto High School. At 2:25 pm, as usual, students burst into the hallways from every classroom, flowing, as if downstream, through the once empty halls and into waiting buses and cars in the parking lot beyond. On this particular Thursday in May of 2008, when the final bell rang, the flow of bodies was partially redirected into the cafeteria. The room was decorated with the flags from 50 countries for “Letters and Lattes,” an event sponsored by the Dublin Scioto chapter of Amnesty International. With snacks in hands and acoustic guitar music filling the air, we moved through the cafeteria, stopping at different tables to write letters to government officials around the world or to pick up information about a number of Human Rights causes.

“The world needs you” a leader of the Amnesty International chapter told the room and our chests puffed up with pride—the event had raised money for school supplies for girls in Afghanistan and solar powered stoves for families in Sudan, and of course, we had “raised awareness” for some unknown public, ignorant prior to our supposed intervention. Even if our grassroots efforts weren’t successful, she told us, “they do have an affect on those who are less aware.”<sup>29</sup> A short piece commending the event appeared the local newspaper the following day. Entitled “Teens strive to help less fortunate,” the article described the event as a gathering “in support of people from other countries who do not have the freedoms enjoyed here.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Preston-Coy, Candace. 2008. “Teens Strive to Help Less Fortunate.” *ThisWeek Community Newspapers*. The Dublin News, May 9, accessed January 15, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Which people? Which countries? Which freedoms? And just how were we supporting them? Neither the article nor the event itself specified much. The causes and countries represented were multiple and our attention spans were short. In the hour, our support had spanned from Afghanistan to Darfur and bridged issues from education to water. Still, we were “striving to help the less fortunate.” As Leo, one of the organizers of the event explained to the newspaper reporter: “We realize there are a lot of problems in the world today and even though we're young and in high school we can make a difference whether it's a big one or a little one.”<sup>31</sup> Though most of us had never traveled outside of the United States, by being in that cafeteria, we were marking ourselves as aware, globally minded, and empathetic toward the suffering of others. We were making claims on a cosmopolitan identity, without ever leaving Ohio.

The theoretical takes on cosmopolitanism are numerous,<sup>32</sup> but in this project I am most informed by and critically modify the notion put forth by Ulf Hannerz in *Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture* (1996). When considered as Hannerz does, as a perspective of openness and willingness to engage with ideas and people that are Other (103) cosmopolitanism is apt to describe the global perspectives and practices of the young, middle-class Americans I discuss in this project. However, this application requires some qualification. While Hannerz’s cosmopolitan is defined by her “orientation,” she is assumed to be mobile. Indeed, she is defined in opposition to both non-cosmopolitan tourists and to locals. The possibilities for cultivating a

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed literature review of the theoretical and philosophical work on cosmopolitanism see Notar 2008: 617-623.

cosmopolitan orientation from one's locality, without ever moving, have only recently entered the theoretical discussion (Cohen 1992; Notar 2008; Werbner 2006). In this section, I am interested in the possibilities for cultivating or aspiring to a cosmopolitan identity without ever leaving home. Thus, following a long line of anthropologists who have complicated the assumption that the cosmopolitan is inherently elite and Western,<sup>33</sup> and specifically building on Beth Notar's conceptualization of a "local" cosmopolitanism, I make certain amendments. In this chapter, my use of the term cosmopolitanism remains focused on the orientation, the *desire* for contact with the Other, rather than the contact itself. Indeed, the defining feature of the middle-class young people who think and act globally is not necessarily physical contact with people from other places, nor specific travel practices. Instead, these aspiring cosmopolitans, like their mobile counterparts, make claims to a cosmopolitan identity via the "consumption of other places" (Notar 2008:618).

I refer to myself and those other high schoolers as aspiring cosmopolitans who were in the clumsy process of growing into ourselves within and in opposition to Dublin, Ohio. Our endeavors to construct ourselves as cosmopolitan occurred through the commodification and purchase of "the World" and of difference, rather than through sustained interaction with a specific place. Furthermore, this ability to cultivate what Kahn (2002) describes as "continuous openness to the world" (Notar 2008:618) was enabled by our social and economic location. Like Hannerz's (1996) cosmopolitan defining herself in opposition to the local or the tourist (102-104), as we modeled ourselves as aspiring cosmopolitans, we were defining ourselves in

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<sup>33</sup> See Notar 2008:618 for a listing of these works.

opposition to the non-cosmopolitans outside of the cafeteria. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) notes, class identity, as a form of distinction, is defined not only by its own attributes and properties, but in relation to other positions. In other words, a particular position is derived from “everything which distinguishes it from what it is not and especially from everything it is opposed to; social identity is defined and asserted through difference” (Bourdieu 1984:172). We were defining ourselves against what we perceived as ubiquitous less-aware suburbanites. Our view was limited to the small slice of the United States to which our parents would drive us. So we saw strip malls, pep rallies, highways, and MTV as emblematic of shallow, apathetic, fat and ignorant Americans.<sup>34</sup> This was the “America” of our imagination and one that we loved to hate.<sup>35</sup> We weren't shy about screaming our criticisms and in online social spheres where we were protected by the semi-anonymity of the Internet, we were even louder. One day after reading some statistic about Americans’ plummeting knowledge about geography, my friend Dave posted on his blog:

*Today's world is full of people who care more about Brad and Jen's break-up than they do about global warming, or poverty, or even telling their own damn country apart from Canada. I'm embarrassed to call myself an American. We live in a nation with resources out the wazoo, which less fortunate people would give a limb for, and yet so many choose to waste their lives on such unimportant and insignificant things.*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Today I hesitate to even write these stereotypes, as they seem clearly laden with disrespectful and problematic social norms.

<sup>35</sup> In general, I try to avoid using “America” to refer to the United States as it actively invisibilizes the entirety of the Americas and the 35 other nations therein. However, I use the term here because the country that I'm describing is “America” in the popular imagination and the word comes with the same associations that I'm pointing to.

<sup>36</sup> Dave has since deleted his blog; this quote comes from a paper that a mutual friend wrote about him.

This was a common sentiment amongst my friends in Dublin. We spouted haphazard critiques aimed at everything around us: suburbia, ignorant Americans, football culture, celebrity fandom, all of it. Underneath our words was always the whispering protest: *we are different from all of this*. This was our way of marking our cosmopolitanism-as-distinction. We found ourselves in a context we loathed based on happenstance, not choice, so we were actively growing out of it and claiming a different identity. Assuredly, our futures held different, better things. We would leave Ohio. We would end up in New York, San Francisco, Madrid, Amsterdam. We would join the Peace Corps or work for international NGOs, big-name newspapers, or cutting-edge environmental initiatives.

Until then, the project was simple: make sure we weren't mistaken for belonging to suburban Ohio. But even with our best efforts, we still ran the risk of being absorbed into the American mainstream in other people's eyes. So our practices of marking our distinction were overt and confrontational. Some of us wore all black and some of us went to punk shows on Saturdays. Some of us became vegetarians and some of us went to Amnesty International meetings. Some of us got mohawks.<sup>37</sup> Through all of these practices we defined ourselves against the homogenous and stereotypical middle-class American of our imaginations.

When our gaze and our practices were focused on "the World" we marked ourselves we distinguished ourselves from the "unaware locals." However, from Dublin, OH, our options were limited. Our young age and semi-isolated geographical location meant that the cosmopolitan cities we looked to were temporarily out of

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<sup>37</sup> Certainly some of these attempts at differentiating ourselves are fairly mainstream, but in our homogeneous high school, they fulfilled their purpose of distinguishing us.

reach. For the moment, “the World” had to come to us, be it in the form of Amnesty International meetings or what we ate for lunch.

We didn’t need to travel abroad to accrue the distinction that comes with international engagement. Instead, we could demonstrate our worldliness with our wallets. We could fulfill our individual desires while still thinking globally and “ethically.” We became what Josée Johnston (2007) refers to as “citizen-consumers” through which the competing values of self-interested consumerism and collective responsibility are ostensibly merged into a hybrid identity. In the age of purported corporate responsibility, this was increasingly easy, as more and more companies offered options for “ethical” global consumption. Heralded as a win-win-win situation, which could benefit the economy, consumers and “the World” simultaneously, rising numbers of corporations like Whole Foods, Starbucks, and even Walmart offer “consumers an opportunity to 'make a difference'” through their purchases (Johnston 2007:239).

While this shift has been fueled, in part, by consumer demand, it is also a product of corporate exploitation of certain values and the niche markets that hold them (Johnston 2007:240). Under post-Fordism, consumption practices reflect a “postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference and the commodification of cultural forms” (Harvey 1989:156). The resulting flexible production systems have come to exploit or even rely upon “highly specialized and small-scale market niches,” (Harvey 1989:156) including the group I am discussing here: young, middle-class, politically-aware, aspiring cosmopolitans. Companies catered to our ethos. The integration of ideological and ethical ways of being into consumer practices

facilitated an almost effortless incorporation of cosmopolitanism into our identities. We could demonstrate our ideological affinity with the people of the world through the fair trade coffee we drank, the organic, local food we ate, the books we read, and the music we listened to. We could simultaneously consume goods that demonstrated the personal and ideological traits we aspired to, while “producing an optimal social outcome” for others around the world (Johnston 2007:241).

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Toward the end of my junior year at Wesleyan, looking for a break from the library, I spent many afternoons in a coffee shop near campus. Slightly more expensive than other similar cafes, the menu and the atmosphere at this one were targeted at the discerning consumer. With a spinach and ricotta breakfast wrap, one could purchase a “gift from Guatemala” or a CD of world music. Each time I ordered my medium hazelnut coffee, I could not help but notice the large display of CDs from Putumayo World Music featured on the main counter with enticing titles like: *Africa Beat*, *Tango Around the World*, and *Turkish Groove*. According to the Putumayo's website, the company's mission is to “introduce people to the music of the world's cultures.”<sup>38</sup> Connoting both elite-status and alternative taste, goods that demonstrate an interest in planet-wide issues are increasingly marketable and desired.

In Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There (2000)

David Brooks describes the Bourgeois Bohemians (Bobos), a new elite that possesses both economic and high cultural capital. Brooks argues that because “classes define

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<sup>38</sup>“About Us.” Putumayo World Music, accessed March 12, 2012, <http://www.putumayo.com/AboutUs>.

themselves by their means of consumption”<sup>39</sup> (61) in the ever-expansive and ostensibly inclusive American middle-class, the professional or elite sector must define themselves with a higher degree of exclusiveness, seeking out the exotic, the authentic, the hard to find. That these values are synonymous with elite status indicates that fostering a cosmopolitan identity, through specific consumption practices, contains the dual benefit of marking oneself as alternative, while still solidifying one's social position.

In the various stomping grounds of the professional middle class from campus dining halls to grocery stores, opportunities for global consumption abound. A short walk around the Wesleyan University campus reflects that discerning taste and a global perspective are deeply intertwined. A lunch at the University Center could easily consist of an Indian lassi, a Korean beef wrap, and an Argentine mate. Campus bulletin boards boast opportunities to spend spring break volunteering in Nicaragua instead of partying in Panama City. A student could drink fair trade Colombian coffee on the way to their West African Music and Culture class, which lets out just in time to head over to the week's Wesleyan World Wednesday presentation about water in rural Tanzania. Through these practices, we mark ourselves as discerning, globally-aware, responsible, trendy and cultured, in other words, aspiring cosmopolitans. As Caren Kaplan (1995) argues, transnational consumption practices can allow one to make claims to cosmopolitanism without ever leaving home, “fantasizing contact with difference while maintaining a comfortable distance” (60).

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<sup>39</sup> In the complete quote, Brooks playfully amends Karl Marx's (1984) assertion that classes are defined by their means of production.

Whether buying a Putumayo CD or a can of yerba mate, the consumer receives more than just the product itself. Consuming these international products signifies a degree of global access, knowledge and competence, which accrues for the consumer what Pierre Bourdieu (1986) refers to as cultural capital. However, the primary purpose of these goods is not necessarily to develop meaningful cross-cultural understanding through sustained interaction, but rather, to signify it in the short-term. In the case of Putumayo CDs, specificity, history and context are bypassed for ease of consumption; in 10 to 12 songs, one gets an ‘introduction’ to the music of an entire continent or genre. Similarly, when one purchases a can of yerba mate, complete with indigenous looking cartoon men and women on the label, the fact that the beverage could not be more different than the experience of consuming mate in Argentina is unimportant. I learned during my time in Argentina that drinking mate is a group experience.<sup>40</sup> One pours yerba into the gourd, then repeatedly pours hot water from a thermos over the yerba, passing it around the room so that each person in the group can drink the mate through a straw, called the bombilla. When canned or bottled, drinking mate is divorced from the practical and social aspects that define it in Argentina. On a snack run during a night of studying, my Argentine friend Alicia and I laughed heartily at rows of Guayaki yerba mate in stock at the campus grocery, which promised us “The more mate you drink the more forest you save!”<sup>41</sup> But when we stopped cracking up, she told me that she found the rows of yerba mate in the campus grocery to be an insensitive, almost offensive commodification of her

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<sup>40</sup> As I demonstrate in the next section, travel and the face-to-face contact it allows yields more cultural capital than a distanced purchase. In attempting to make a point, I inadvertently positioned myself as a more “authentic” cosmopolitan than those who consume mate from afar. Ironic.

<sup>41</sup> “Home.” Guayaki Organic Yerba Mate, accessed March 12, 2012, <http://www.guayaki.com>.

culture, lamenting that there were so many “gringos who drink cans of mate who can’t even find Argentina on a map!”

To be clear, I do not believe that knowledge about other countries acquired through mainstream venues need be superficial, but as the examples show, it often can be. Such commodities attempt to facilitate some level of global exchange and understanding, while still satisfying, entertaining and distinguishing the consumer. Consumer satisfaction is often (or perhaps always) privileged over depth or responsible representation of the Other.

### **Cosmopolitans on the move: Travel, Study Abroad, and “Alternative” Tourism**

Of course, consumption practices are not the only way that young Americans can make claims to a cosmopolitan identity and distinguish themselves from the mainstream. Classically considered, cosmopolitanism is acquired via movement across national borders and through “authentic” contact with “Others.” Travel, then, holds particular power in marking distinction, for a visit to Argentina carries more “authenticity” and prestige than a can of yerba mate with lunch. As Rachael Miller-Howard (2010) explains, experiences abroad (and the stories told about those experiences) “are the means by which the traveler is reinserted, better, back home” (11). Enabled by the conditions of a middle-class background, travel also serves to reinforce one's social location therein. This is particularly important for members of the professional middle class (PMC), because as Barbara Ehrenreich (1989) describes, the PMC’s “only ‘capital’ is knowledge and skill,” (15), which as Pierre Bourdieu (1986) reminds us “cannot be transmitted instantaneously by gift or

bequest” (48). Instead, this “embodied capital” must be acquired anew each generation (Bourdieu 1986:48).

Travel experiences, then, function much like the previously discussed commodities in that they accrue, for the aspiring cosmopolitan, cultural capital. Not only can travel, especially to exotic locations in the so-called “Third World” serve as “proof of taste,” but also they allow for the accumulation of knowledge, experience and competence that can facilitate the accumulation of economic capital back home (Miller-Howard 2010:29).

A look into the rhetoric and practice of an elite, private University again demonstrates the strong connection between discerning taste and a global focus. As Universities are an important training ground for members of the professional middle-class, it is unsurprising that study abroad is a crucial part of a “cosmopolitan liberal arts” education at institutions like Wesleyan University.<sup>42</sup> To discover the role of study abroad at Wesleyan, one need not look any farther than the Office of International Studies (OIS), the administrative office that facilitates undergraduate study abroad. Part of the “About Us” section on the OIS website is particularly instructive:

In an increasingly interdependent world, understanding of other societies is an essential aspect of one's education; through the opportunity to study in another country, culture, and language, Wesleyan offers its students access to a wealth of knowledge and experience that can enrich the personal, academic, and professional lives of participants. Wesleyan students seem to recognize this instinctively: almost fifty percent of our students spend a semester or year

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Roth, “Liberal Arts Education: From Clubbiness to Cosmopolitanism.” The Huffington Post, May 10, 2011, accessed January 20, 2012.

abroad, earning credit toward their Wesleyan degrees through some 150 academic programs in nearly fifty countries<sup>43</sup>

Speaking to the changing terrain of the “increasingly interdependent world,” this selection outlines the varied benefits of studying abroad as part of the liberal arts education and as a means to foster personal growth, academic enrichment and future professional success. Further, this blurb serves to construct the model Wesleyan student, as a budding cosmopolitan who is instinctive, ambitious, and globally-minded. As an undergraduate and even before, cosmopolitan competence is increasingly crucial to success and distinction. In a recent New York Times article, Jenny Anderson (2011) argues that international experiences also have substantial weight in the college admissions process. Whether in the form of a gap-year, a summer spent volunteering abroad, or even a family vacation to a more unusual destination, “specialized, exotic and sometimes costly activities” like time spent abroad provide prime material for writing an admissions essay that demonstrates cultural competence, insight, and access to new skills that will put those who participate “in the spotlight in a crowded field of straight-A students.”<sup>44</sup>

At home or abroad, aspiring cosmopolitans must define themselves carefully. Like high school seniors trying to stand out in the crowd of college applicants, cosmopolitan travelers aim to set themselves apart from tourists. Though I didn't realize it at the time, the unfamiliar social terrain in Peru prompted me to take on a new set of identifying behaviors. In the United States, I had carefully crafted an

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<sup>43</sup> “Office of International Studies.” Wesleyan University, accessed May 7, 2011, <http://www.wesleyan.edu/ois>.

<sup>44</sup> Jenny Anderson, “For a Standout College Essay, Applicants Fill Their Summers.” The New York Times, August 5, 2011, accessed January 16, 2012.

identity, which marked me as distinct from the mainstream. Swimming in a sea of tourists, these nuances did not translate neatly, so I followed new prescriptions for self-definition.

This started almost immediately after I stepped off the plane. After less than 24 hours in Lima I had already grown accustomed to the constancy of the handicraft markets. I had tried to avoid them, having spent my flight reading a biting ethnographic critique of tourist consumption practices and given my tight budget for the month. But as I biked back toward my hostel after an afternoon of exploring, it began to rain and I sought shelter. Feeling cold and enticed by a colorful sign promising an “Inca Market,” I ducked under the archway, waved an absent-minded hello to an enthusiastic greeter adorned head to foot in what appeared to be traditional Incan clothing, and entered into the open hallway. Inside, I found storefronts overflowing with alpaca wool sweaters, indigenous looking weavings and pan flutes, all fixtures in any market with even a few passing tourists. I picked up a knit hat and tried it on while chatting with the woman working in the store.

*¿Le gusta el gorro?* She asks me: Do you like the hat?

*Si, me encanta! Pero, una pregunta: ¿parezco más gringa con el gorro?* Yes, I love it! But a question: does it make me look more like a gringa?<sup>45</sup>

The woman let out a burst of laughter, obviously surprised by my question.

Without provocation, she launched into a story about a particularly annoying group of

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<sup>45</sup> In Spanish, the word “gringo” or “gringa” refers to a foreigner, most often a white person from North America or Europe. Its precise definition varies both from country to country and often even more dramatically between native and non-native Spanish speakers. The connotations it carries can range from derogatory to neutral to humorous, depending on context and tone. However, the history of the term suggests that it has always been linked with contempt for invasive foreigners. A friend told me that the term originated from early invasions of the green-clad US army in Latin America, when some reacted to the military presence with cries of “Green-Go!”

tourists who had passed through earlier in the day. In one sentence, I had succeeded in distinguishing myself from the mass of tourists in alpaca hats. My confident, albeit imperfect use of Spanish demonstrated a degree of local grounding and competence and distinguished me, at least in my eyes, from other, presumably unaware tourists. By referring to myself as a gringa, I positioned myself as a partial insider and indicated that I did not identify with the mainstream tourist culture and was critical of my own role within it. I had poked fun at myself, certainly, but simultaneously, I mocked the “gringo uniform” and the superficial consumption of local culture and clothing so commonplace among tourists in Peru.<sup>46</sup>

The ubiquity of the tourism industry in Peru ensured that my blonde-haired, white-skinned body was immediately identifiable, and associated with the hoards of other foreigners. Because I always ran the risk “of being taken for a tourist by locals whose experience makes them apply this label routinely” (Hannerz 1996:105) as I purchased the maroon alpaca hat, I felt the need to distinguish myself the other foreigners doing the same thing. As Hannerz (1996) notes, my arrogant desire to distinguish myself from more “incompetent” tourists is integral to a cosmopolitan orientation (105).

The pervasiveness of attempts to differentiate “authentic” travel practices from mainstream tourism has been well documented by former Wesleyan students in critical work on alternative travel, from backpacker subculture to study abroad programs (Fink-Shapiro 2009; Miller-Howard 2010; Zemach-Bersin 2007). These

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<sup>46</sup> In her thesis *Pleasure and Danger on the Gringo Trail: an ethnography of Bolivian party hostels* Lily Fink-Shapiro (2009) describes the “gringo uniform”- a style common among backpackers in the Andean region consisting of a combination of “hi-tech travel gear” and locally-made, traditional-looking clothing (24-25).

ethnographies document travelers in pursuit of distinction, often from both “less-authentic” tourists and the mainstream middle-class back at home.

Indeed, different types of travel yield different forms of distinction and use them to different ends. A number of factors play a role in determining the social weight that a given experience abroad might have in different segments of society. For aspiring cosmopolitans, destination is key, as travel to exotic locations in the so-called Third World accrues more distinction, signifying an interest in the “Other” and ostensibly requiring global knowledge and competence. Moreover, the way in which one travels is equally important. As Lily Fink- Shapiro (2009) points out, for backpackers and other alternative travelers, “authentic” travel is of the highest importance, thus staying in hostels rather than in hotels or resorts, taking buses and other local public transportation, and eating in local establishments, all serve as means for claiming subcultural capital (46).<sup>47</sup> The activities, which constitute a trip, are equally significant. Cosmopolitans strive to be participants, rather than spectators (Hannerz 1996:105). Thus, one can better make claims to a cosmopolitan ethos when combining travel with education, adventure, or perhaps most relevant to this project, volunteer work, rather than solely traveling for leisure. Though alternative forms of tourism, such as eco-tourism, roots tourism, and queer-tourism have been critiqued for attempting to address some social issues while retaining the same problems of the

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<sup>47</sup> Subcultural capital functions as Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital, but is a means of distinguishing membership in a subculture, so functions on a smaller, more specific scale. As Fink Shapiro (2009) explains, “implies a de-centered cultural field shaped by multiple systems of value or taste hierarchies” (22).

tourism industry,<sup>48</sup> the potential contradictions of combining volunteer work with tourism are especially glaring.

Indeed, voluntourism appears oxymoronic, even in name. Whereas tourism, as both an industry and a strategy for capitalist development relies on and exacerbates class, gender and national hierarchies, as scholars such as Cynthia Enloe (1990) have so forcefully argued, international volunteerism claims to address and mitigate the repercussions of these capitalist hierarchies by means of charity, humanitarianism and direct service. The former, which some argue is capitalism writ large, and the latter, which is commonly seen as the epitome of social justice, merge in the new terrain of voluntourism. Fused with tourism, these volunteering opportunities come neatly packaged, user-friendly, and available to anyone who can pay, no matter their qualification. The experience itself is sold through elaborate marketing campaigns and likely purchased by the same discerning consumers who purchase Putumayo CDs or cans of yerba mate. Promotional materials claim a long list of benefits: cultural immersion, stress-free travel, authentic tourism, the chance to make meaningful connections with locals, language practice, intercultural exchange, personal satisfaction, and of course, the opportunity to help the “less-fortunate.”<sup>49</sup> Championed as “the experience of a lifetime,” combining personal growth and enrichment with the

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<sup>48</sup> For more on queer tourism see Howe 2008; Puar 2002; Waitt and Markwell 2006; for more on roots tourism see Ebron 2002; Bruner 1996; Pinho 2008; for more on eco-tourism see Vivanco 2006; Carrier and Macleod 2005.

<sup>49</sup> ““Volunteer Abroad.” A Broader View, accessed March 6, 2012, <https://www.abroaderview.org>; “International Volunteer Projects.” Volunteers for Peace, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://vfp.org>; “Volunteer Abroad Programs.” Cross-Cultural Solutions, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org>.

chance to “make a difference,”<sup>50</sup> voluntourism is marked by the same promises and contradictions as ethical consumption.

Indeed, the hybrid of volunteer tourism closely resembles Johnston’s (2007) citizen-consumer; as both strive to bring together two seemingly contradictory ideas: self-interested individual pleasure and a socially responsible push for social justice. Yet, as Johnston notes, such a balance is extremely difficult to achieve. In the case of Whole Foods Market that she outlines, “the citizen-consumer hybrid provides superficial attention to citizenship goals in order to serve three consumer interests better: consumer choice, status distinction and ecological cornucopianism” (Johnston 2007:229). While voluntourism claims to benefit not only the volunteers, but also the local communities, in both promotional materials and in day-to-day interactions, the experience of the volunteer (read: the customer) is prioritized. The organizations offering voluntourism trips strive for customer satisfaction, which means a volunteer who is satisfied with all aspects of their experience. When one A Broader View volunteer was unhappy with her placement in a local orphanage, she simply did not go, spending her nights in the bustling Cusco bars, while Christina, the county coordinator from A Broader View spent days hunting for more suitable location in need of a volunteer.

Not only was volunteering placement more dependent on the desires and preferences of the volunteer than on the organizations being served, but in the A Broader View program, the volunteering aspect of the program was deemphasized. Right after my arrival, Christina had encouraged me to work only half-days to ensure

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<sup>50</sup> “Volunteer Abroad Programs.” Cross-Cultural Solutions, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org>.

I have enough time to explore Cusco. Christina checked in with me constantly, pampering me to the point that I was uncomfortable. If any detail didn't satisfy me completely, no matter if it was the volunteering placement, the food served in the home-stay, or the opportunities for sightseeing on the weekends, I was encouraged to call her immediately.

More often than not, Christina seemed more like a travel agent than a volunteer coordinator; and after our initial conversations about volunteering, her focus was primarily on the other aspects of my experience, particularly, the opportunities for tourism and sightseeing. That the program was based in Cusco meant that tourism opportunities were endless and volunteers came with high expectations. Under pressure from the organization and volunteers to provide an authentic Peruvian experience, Christina organized group trips to popular destinations like Machu Picchu and Lake Titicaca on the weekends, and evening excursions to experience "Peruvian culture" by eating popular food like ceviche and pisco sours, and watching traditional dance performances. The emphasis on cultural tourism, rather than volunteer work, was reinforced not only by the organization, but by participating volunteers.

Rachael and Emily, two high schoolers from Vermont, complained constantly that between their volunteering and their Spanish courses, they didn't have enough time to tour Cusco and the surrounding area. In fact, for Rachael and Emily, the program was appealing, less for the volunteering, but because it was an opportunity for safe, structured travel. Neither had volunteered before, but they had known that they wanted their summer to be an "adventure." Both of them were under 18 and had

struggled to find a program that would allow them freedom to manage themselves, while still promising enough structure to satisfy their worried parents.

The variety of voluntourism trips on the market ensures that trips with different priorities are readily available. Between the two trips that I participated in, there were substantial differences in cost and emphasis. Though still marketed as an opportunity to “see the world and make life-long friends while volunteering on a meaningful community service project,”<sup>51</sup> the trip with Volunteers for Peace placed more emphasis on volunteering and less on meeting the volunteer’s individual needs and desires for recreation. Seemingly, the lower a program fee, the more the customer is responsible for structuring her experience. On a very basic level, with A Broader View, volunteers were encouraged to work no more than three hours a day, while with Volunteers for Peace, our work days were at least six hours. Further, our living arrangements in the VFP trip consisted of a concrete floor shared between six volunteers and the group was responsible for preparing our own meals, while in the ABV program all volunteers were hosted in individual homestays with private bedrooms and three home cooked meals a day. Still, the Volunteers for Peace program had a similar emphasis on leisure time. Part of our program fee went into a recreation budget which funded weekend excursions to the beach, to an artisan market, or to nearby cities. Moreover, the volunteering itself was broken up into two separate projects in different cities. Because, as Tania, the group leader, explained: *Es una oportunidad para el turismo, para ver más partes del Perú*, “It’s an opportunity for tourism, to see more parts of Peru.”

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<sup>51</sup> “International Volunteer Projects.” Volunteers for Peace, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://vfp.org>.

Still, the less audacious marketing and smaller trip fee attracted volunteers to the Volunteers for Peace program for very different reasons than those who participated in the A Broader View program. Although one Volunteers for Peace participant, Pat still mentioned that “volunteering like this is a good way to travel” and even that teaching English “would look good on a resume” he quickly qualified both statements with “not that I did it for that reason.” Ellie too told me that although she was grateful for the opportunity to travel, volunteering was the most important part of her decision to come on the program. Particularly indicative was a comment that Max, another volunteer, made in jest one afternoon at the beach: “I didn’t come here to help people, I came here to inspire myself!” and that he quickly added, “if you guys don't understand sarcasm that was a joke.” This difference between the two trips is intriguing. While volunteers I met on the VFP trip consistently emphasized their commitment to helping, those on ABV trip honestly admitted that they had come for the language practice and opportunity to travel.

Voluntourism is clearly not a monolithic practice. This cornucopia of options indicates the degree to which these trips function like a commodity. Like products sold in the Whole Foods Market, voluntourism aims to satisfying competing concepts such as leisure and labor and self-indulgence and selflessness simultaneously. As a hybrid commodity, voluntourism trips offer superficial attention to social goals, in this case, the volunteer project, and remain focused instead on the experience and satisfaction of the volunteer. Voluntourism trips raise some of the same questions as the other global commodities discussed in this chapter, but in these instances, the stakes are higher. While good purchased in a supermarket or cafe involve numerous

people around the world in their production and distribution, volunteering programs require numerous direct, face-to-face interactions, none of which are neutral.

In the next chapter, I will explore the potential effects of these interactions on the uneven ground (Chatterton 2006) of the trips I participated in. I interrogate the degree to which these trips were successful in the eyes of volunteers. Rather than attempting to conclude how effective other actors believed the trips were, I utilize critical literature on development, humanitarianism, and tourism, as an analytic window into the potential for harm that can occur when volunteer satisfaction is prioritized.

## Chapter 2

# Voluntourism on Slippery Ground: Effectiveness, Ambiguity and Politics

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One evening, in the throes of thesis work, my friend Alicia and I were sipping coffee while we talked around her kitchen table. Alicia was recalling a service-trip she had undertaken in high school, which had consisted of two weeks facilitating workshops on environmentalism for an indigenous community in Costa Rica. Her resultant disdain for volunteer work was abundantly clear as she narrated the experience. Throughout her story, we both made connections to my project and she offered helpful suggestions for how I might clarify my ideas on the problematics of helping. Her housemate Mary, who was washing dishes across the room, listened as we talked. Our conversation ended and I returned my gaze to the small computer screen in front of me until Mary interjected unexpectedly: “Wait... are you saying volunteer trips aren’t a good thing?”

Amongst friends and peers at Wesleyan I had grown accustomed to a general affinity of critical ideas related to my subject matter, so for a moment Mary’s reaction took me by surprise. However, the question itself was not an unusual reaction. Indeed, mainstream media coverage on voluntourism trips asks the same question. A cursory look at this coverage yields a host of sensational headlines such as: *Voluntourism: Good or Bad?* (Muspratt 2010), *Voluntourism: Pros, Cons and Possibilities* (Ellis 2007), *Voluntourism: The Benefits and Pitfalls You Need to Know* (Clothier 2010), *Voluntourism: More Harm Than Good?* (Ho 2009), and *The*

*Voluntourism Debate* (Garlick 2011). For newspaper reporters and my grandmother alike, the fundamental question about voluntourism is whether these trips are *good* or *bad*. Of course, the specific meaning of such a value-laden question depends on the person doing the asking and the context in which the question is raised. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how these trips function as depoliticized commodities, privileging the satisfaction of the consumer, and deemphasizing the social goals they concurrently proclaim except insofar as they better satisfy the volunteer-consumer. It follows, then, that shopping for a voluntourism trip is much like making any other purchase, and the volunteer-consumer is interested in making a good investment from which they can derive personal satisfaction. Voluntourism trips can cost upwards of several thousand dollars, so the volunteer-consumer is interested in finding a trip that will yield the best tangible outcomes. While differing from person to person, the volunteers I met were looking for an experience in which their input (money, time, energy) would produce an effective and fulfilling output. Thus the underlying question for many becomes: *Are volunteer tourism trips effective?*

This chapter does not attempt to answer that question. My ability to draw such stark conclusions is limited by my position as an outsider to the host communities, the short-term nature of these trips, and the general difficulty of empirically calculating the cause and effect of a given phenomenon (Solnit 2004:4). Furthermore, it is difficult to assess the “effectiveness” of volunteering initiatives, because it is unclear what “effectiveness” actually means. Effective for whom? The volunteer? The host community? And effective to what ends? Satisfying the volunteer? Creating some sort of social change for the host community?

Instead, in order to deconstruct the notion of effectiveness, this chapter will take up a series of related questions: What are the objectives of the short-term volunteering projects offered by A Broader View and Volunteers for Peace, as proposed by their promotional materials? Did volunteers find the volunteering component to be “effective” in these terms? And, if ineffective in their proposed objectives, what were the other potential effects of these trips for the volunteers and the host communities?

Essentially, my purpose is twofold: first, to analyze the volunteer work from the perspective of the participating volunteers, and second, to theorize the potential dangers, difficulties and limitations that could surface along the way. To the first end, I analyze volunteer narratives and my own experiences, excavating our impressions of our own satisfaction and the broader utility of the work we undertook. To the second, I look to the wisdom of critical anthropological work on development and humanitarianism, as it applies to my fieldwork. Though I cannot speak to the long-term effects of the programs I participated in, there were moments during the trip, which imply the applicability of these cautionary theories to these two trips, and voluntourism more broadly.

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Framed by a colorful photo of a blond-haired volunteer with his arms around two smiling dark-skinned children the A Broader View website proclaims:

Volunteering abroad allows you to work side by side with local people, learn a new language, immersion in an exotic culture, live with a local host family and participate in humanitarian mission work and make a meaningful contribution to your host community.<sup>52</sup>

The Volunteers for Peace website also contains a series of photos, an eclectic looking group of volunteers in matching tee-shirts, holding cardboard versions of international flags, then a smiling white woman, surrounded by an eager looking group of African children, then a bearded volunteer with a pickax in hand, hard at work. To the side, is the organization's mission:

Volunteers for Peace (VFP) offers placement in international volunteer projects in more than 100 countries around the world... Our affordable projects provide thousands of opportunities to see the world and make life-long friends while volunteering on a meaningful community service project.<sup>53</sup>

As I demonstrated in chapter one, the majority of the promises found in promotional materials for volunteer tourism trips are only tangentially related to the activities that are ostensibly the primary purpose of the trip (childcare, teaching, etc). Instead, they tend to highlight opportunities related to immersion in an exotic, "Third World" destination. On both websites the volunteer work is promoted in vague terms, emphasizing that the project will be *meaningful*, and little else. This again raises the question: Meaningful for whom and how? A Broader View emphasizes the opportunity to "make a *meaningful* contribution," implying that it will be meaningful for the host community, yet later in their information, the organization promises "one of the most rewarding experiences of *your* life."<sup>54</sup> The Volunteers for Peace site

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<sup>52</sup> "Volunteer Abroad." A Broader View, accessed March 6, 2012, <https://www.abroaderview.org>.

<sup>53</sup> "International Volunteer Projects." Volunteers for Peace, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://vfp.org>.

<sup>54</sup> "Volunteer Abroad." A Broader View, accessed March 6, 2012, <https://www.abroaderview.org>. (italics mine).

similarly promises a “*meaningful* community service project,” which will be rewarding for the volunteer. As I have argued, that the value of the volunteer work is predominately described insofar as it is *meaningful* for the volunteer is indicative of the primary beneficiary of such projects: unequivocally, the volunteer-consumer.

I had anticipated that even if volunteer tourism trips might be ineffective at promoting some broader social change, they would succeed in satisfying volunteers’ desire for the promised *meaningful* experience. I was surprised to find that while volunteers generally felt fulfilled by the program’s opportunities for tourism, relationship building amongst themselves, language practice and cultural immersion, they were rarely satisfied by the volunteer work itself. In the first section of this chapter, I examine the volunteer work through my own experiences and those of the volunteers I worked with. As I will show, the volunteers were largely dissatisfied, a product of the disjuncture between institutional proclamations of their inherent ability to “do-good” and the more ambiguous realities they faced. In the second section, I argue that although their work may not have met the objectives of individual volunteers, nor the supposed objectives of the organizations they came with, the work did not “do nothing” as some volunteers complained. I build on critical anthropological literature on development and humanitarianism, to highlight unintended consequences that voluntourism can have on the ground. I locate voluntourism within the muddled landscape of international aid, noting the ideological and practical convergences, as well as the moments where volunteer tourism diverts from these forms of institutional engagement. In my central argument, I build on the work of James Ferguson (1994) and Miriam Ticktin (2006), to note the

ways that while appearing to be an apolitical intervention, volunteer tourism can have deeply political effects.

### **Ambiguity and Ambivalence: Volunteer Perceptions of Their Work**

Cusco, Peru. Monday July 11th, 2011

After a weekend spent acclimating to the altitude and tourist watching around the city, I was more than ready to start volunteering, and with it, begin the ostensible purpose of the program. At 1:00pm, Christina, the country coordinator for A Broader View accompanied me to the orphanage and led me into the office of the orphanage director. When I entered, the director glanced up, acknowledging Christina, then returned her gaze to the impressive stack of papers on her desk. Continuing to sift through a thick looking packet, she asked what I wanted to do. Before I had a chance to reply, she fired another question: *¿Qué sabes hacer?* What do you know how to do? I fumbled for the words in Spanish, trying to make it clear that I was happy to do absolutely anything that would be useful. The director stared at me, her face as cold as ever. Christina intervened on my behalf, handing in some papers and assuring the director that another volunteer would be arriving in the following week to take my place. The two conversed in quick Spanish and I lost track of the conversation. After a few minutes, Christina informed me that they had decided that I would work specifically with one boy, Brandon, who had been struggling with his schoolwork. As soon as I nodded, the director motioned curtly for us to leave.

We exited the office and Christina walked me to the “casita” that I was to work in. My thoughts were already swimming, as I tried to make sense of the stark

contrast between the reality of the orphanage and the strange terms that brought me into it. Entering the casita didn't help. We were greeted at the door by four children and the casita's "mama," Maria, who served as their live-in caretaker. The children hugged me immediately and the oldest girl clung tightly to my hand, loosening her grip only when prompted to give me some space. Maria, in contrast, appeared as unenthused to see me as the orphanage director had been.

My first day as a volunteer in the orphanage left me cold and confused. I spent two hours sitting at the kitchen table, working with eight-year-old Brandon on the letters of the alphabet. Brandon was not interested in my help, or in learning to read. His assignment was to write "na ne ni no nu" 20 times, and it seemed there was nothing I could do to help him. I sat at his side, passing the minutes by looking around the humble room, trying to work through my feelings that I was utterly useless for the job I was assigned to. In a cautious attempt at making something tangible come out of the day, I asked a few questions of Maria, some small-talk and some related to my project. She answered me quickly each time and eventually excused herself and slipped out of the room. I heard the TV switch on and felt glad that at the very least my presence allowed her a few minutes to herself. I was too timid, too paralyzed by the grandeur of the divide between us to ask anything else of her when she reemerged.

Again and again during my time in the orphanage, I felt utterly incapable at communicating with the children or the adult employees. Though my Spanish was a bit clumsy, this was not the primary barrier to our communication. As Ivan Illich (1968) argues, I could only dialogue with those like me- "Latin American imitations

of the North American middle class,” (4) so while communication with my wealthy host family and with coordinator Christina were awkward, but still feasible, conversation with those I met in the orphanage felt nearly impossible. There was “no common ground whatsoever” for us to meet on (Illich 1968:4). Other volunteers noted this strain on communication: “There’s a part of me that thinks I just can’t build relationships with them. I think we’re too different,” said Rachael, referring to the people she met at the orphanage.

That day, as I sat at the cracked kitchen table peering over Brandon’s shoulder, the uncommon ground we stood on felt insurmountable. Brandon had started drawing a picture of a baby, and was only interested in me if I helped him draw the nose. Feeling smothered by the situation, I excused myself and walked the thin hallway to the bathroom. Inside, I breathed out for the first time in an hour and splashed some water on my face. I found myself wishing that I could stay in the small room for longer, for back in the kitchen, my uselessness was unbearably obvious. I reluctantly returned to the main room, where I anxiously watched the clock until 4:45pm, gave the children quick hugs and half-ran out of the casita. In the waning sunlight outside, I felt instantly better, but I walked the 10 blocks back to my host family’s house completely dazed.

In this moment, and in others throughout my stay, my own emotional reactions to my experience are themselves texts, which are potentially illuminating in a way that academic analysis alone cannot be. They demonstrate a profound disconnect between expectations and assumptions about my value and the reality I found.

The night after my first day in the orphanage, I sat in an Internet café down the street from the house of my host family, alternating my attention between my Googledoc of field notes and a rushed chat conversation with an old friend, trying to make sense of the discomfort I had felt that day. The two were remarkably similar in content, but dramatically different in form and description. I include the chat conversation for its honesty and to further disrupt the presumed incompatibility of the affective and the academic. In contrast to my field notes, my words to Anna were blunt and rambling:

*mmcguire: I'm telling you... I was on the verge of crying. I can't even count the layers of privilege that separate me from the material reality of this orphanage. And I don't even know how to begin being an anthropologist in this situation, or if I should be in the first place.*

*aportzline: Why? What do you mean? :(*

*mmcguire: This program puts privileged white people from the US in "Third World" communities for one or two weeks and really, it's just a vacation, with the added bonus that you get to feel good about yourself for "making a difference" before heading to Machu Picchu. This program requires no commitment, no skills, nothing. And honestly, I don't think the orphanage needs some goofy American teenagers to come for a week or two. I think they probably need money and full time staff and resources, you know?*

Under most circumstances, I described my project and the politics of volunteering to friends and strangers alike, in nuanced, self-policing politically correct language, with specific intention to bring out the productive aspects of volunteering. In contrast, somehow in the hurried space of the conversation and the aftermath of such an intense day, my doubts and my anger pushed to the surface. My negative reaction to this first day of volunteering was visceral and to be a useful part of this analysis, it requires deconstruction. In the moment, I attributed my feelings of discomfort

primarily to my inability to reconcile the layers of privilege that determined the terms of interaction with the people I was meeting. No doubt, this was a strong factor, for beyond being a volunteer, a foreigner, and a tourist, I was also constantly trying to draw lines between the other volunteers, foreigners, tourists and myself, as a “self-aware” ethnographer. In attempting a critical ethnography, I was unintentionally constructing more hierarchies, and always placing myself at the top. I was, as Sarah Gunther (2006) recognizes of herself: “situating myself as higher and more enlightened than the others, and in doing so, blinding myself to my own discursive colonization” (90).

But despite differentiating myself from the other volunteers and criticizing the common presumption that volunteers are always useful and wanted, I argue that my discomfort also stemmed from many of the same assumptions of my inherent value and need in the situation. Though I was not there for the satisfaction of “making a difference,” I had expected that I would *anyway*. Indeed, it is not so easy to escape the internalized idea that “every American has something to give, and at all times may, can and should give it” (Illich 1968:2).

Though my first day in the orphanage was undoubtedly the low point of my time in Cusco, the absurdity of the claim that a week spent playing with orphaned children could “do-good” only became clearer as the days passed. On Wednesday, when I had only three days left at the orphanage, two of the children asked me if I would bring presents for them on my last day. I laughed it off, saying *Vamos a ver*, “We’ll see,” but the next day, they asked again, this time with specific requests. Sebastian wanted a remote control car, Shirley, a volleyball. Again, I smiled and

attempted to change the subject. Sebastian responded with a smile and a set of directions to a store where I could buy the remote control car. Shirley talked me into buying three of her raffle tickets. Despite my discomfort with the situation, I was not able to reconcile my theoretical objections with the vast inequity of resources between us, so on Friday I made a special trip into the center of Cusco to buy presents.

In the afternoon, I arrived at the orphanage with a volleyball, three cars and some accessories for dolls. Upon seeing the big blue bag in my hands, Sebastian's face lit up; however, when I handed out the presents, he was noticeably unimpressed. The car I had given him had no controller. He asked me where the controller was, then whether I would be coming back another day to bring the controller with me. Meanwhile, Shirley tried to talk me into buying more raffle tickets. The whole situation was making me uncomfortable and I declined, but Shirley asked again and again, interrogating me about how much my plane ticket cost, how much money I had. I struggled to respond. How could I explain a seven hundred dollar plane ticket, even if it were grant funded, when I was refusing to give her another dollar for the raffle tickets? Instead of trying to explain myself, I reluctantly pulled out my wallet again.

This moment was shocking, even uncomfortable. Sebastian and Shirley, the two oldest in the casita seemed well aware of the situation and the unequal distribution of resources that defined it. Moreover, having no doubt experienced an endless stream of volunteers passing through their lives, they seemed to have developed an understanding of how to use the strange situation to meet some of their

needs. The fact that my wallet was more useful to the children than my good intentions or desire to help, directly contradicts the presumption that volunteers are inherently valuable and capable of “doing-good.”

Before I left the orphanage that day, it was 4:00pm, TV time. The children flocked into the back bedroom and glued their eyes to the small, black and white screen. Despite their overt displays of affection previously, the children did not even look up to say goodbye, even though it was my last day with them. I left feeling stupid and unappreciated, useful only for the presents I could offer.

This moment illuminates a common tension in aid work. As Maria Eriksson Baaz (2005) demonstrates in her ethnography of “alternative” development initiatives in Tanzania, development workers anticipate recipients who are “eagerly awaiting their knowledge and advice,” rather than their economic assistance (81). The realization that economic support might be more useful and more desirable than the aid worker’s personal contribution is marked by disappointment, as it can “fracture images of the Self as a much-need professional helper” (Baaz 2005:80). To my chagrin, my reaction mirrored that of the development workers Baaz describes. Despite having thought of myself as a detached observer, with no delusions about the utility of my presence, I had undoubtedly held the same assumptions about my inherent value in the situation that I had criticized. As a result, the harsh reality of the situation slapped me across the face. No matter my enthusiasm, personality or effort, I was a disposable presence, one of many young foreigners who paraded through the orphanage for a week or two of do-gooding before moving on.

On the A Broader View website orphanage support work is promoted with grand promises such as: “By providing individual attention to a needy child, you too can make a lasting difference. A hug and a smile provide meaning to the life of kids who had grown up deprived of love and care.”<sup>55</sup> But as the days passed, there was a growing sentiment amongst the volunteers I met that our ability to provide “individual attention,” love and care was stymied by the short duration of our work. Thus, regardless of how much enthusiasm we brought with us, our work was ultimately ineffective. While nearly every person described their overall experience on the program in very positive terms, their relationship with their work volunteering in orphanages around Cusco was much more ambiguous. Indeed, most volunteers, including me, struggled with the realization that the work we were engaged in might not have been useful, effective or necessarily desired.

On an afternoon spent watching the kids play in the grassy area outside of the casita, I met another volunteer, Anya from the Netherlands. She told me that she lived with a group of volunteers, mostly Europeans, in an apartment in the center of Cusco, and drew frequent comparisons between our work in the orphanage and the work that some of the other volunteers she lived with had been assigned. With surprising honesty, she expressed her feelings of uselessness, lamenting: “If the kids don’t want to play with me, I just sit around.” For Anya, the work of her peers, whether with children with special needs, in hospitals, or in organizations for young mothers, seemed more useful, its necessity more measurable.

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<sup>55</sup> “Orphanage/Childcare Assistance” A Broader View, accessed March 6, 2012, <https://www.abroaderview.org/programs/orgphanage-child-care-assistance>.

Two particularly enthusiastic volunteers, Sasha and Helen, both twenty-two years old from Arizona, gave off the appearance of loving every minute of their time in Peru. However, after they had left Cusco, another volunteer divulged that both Sasha and Helen had questioned their work in the orphanage throughout, and had considered cutting their time volunteering in Cusco short to spend a week traveling instead. When I spoke with Sasha on a Skype call after they had returned to the United States, she explained: “I kept asking myself: Should I really be here? Is this helpful to anyone? And I didn’t know how to answer those questions.”

Of course, Christina and my host family consistently told us, as Illich promised they would, “that [we were] doing something valuable, that [we were] ‘sacrificing’ to help others” (Illich 1968:5), that the children needed and appreciated us. But convincing as their words may have been, the inconsistency between this claim and our experiences were palpable. Another volunteer, Rachael, confessed that she hated working in an orphanage. “I just don’t think I’m useful” she said, “If I did this again, I would do some kind of environmental work, like with sea turtles or something. That seems easier and probably more useful.” Her friend Elizabeth agreed, admitting to me that “if I were to do this again, I don’t think I would volunteer at all. Especially not in an orphanage. I just don’t think we have anything to offer.”

Orphanage volunteering, in particular, has been the subject of a considerable amount of disparaging journalism, for being ineffective, or even counter-productive. In general, this work highlights the most egregious scenarios, in which volunteer demand for “hug an orphan vacations” can facilitate situations that

harm children more than helping them (Clemmons 2010; Latham 2011). A recent NPR story on the impact of voluntourists on orphanages in South Africa demonstrated that the basic instability and inconsistency that defines growing up in an orphanage, without parents and with high staff turnover, means that an influx of short-term volunteers, who build relationships for only a few days or weeks before leaving can be harmful for already vulnerable children (Kelto 2010). These effects are compounded as volunteer tourists generally enter orphanages without regulation, training or awareness of the potential harm their presence can enact (Kelto 2010).

Critiques such as these have been substantial enough to prompt analysts within and outside of the voluntourist industry to promote other non-orphanage options for volunteers.<sup>56</sup> However, I argue that the challenges many have demonstrated to be commonplace in orphanage work, namely the incompatibility of short-term work and “meaningful” change are present in much short-term volunteer work.

On the Volunteers for Peace program, our work was similarly focused around working with children; but the volunteering itself was substantially easier to participate in, as we were working in a school rather than an orphanage, and planning activities for the children as a group. Still, ambivalent feelings toward this work were similarly commonplace among volunteers. Rather than appearing as palpable discomfort, grievances about the work manifested in a waning desire to participate, tensions within the group, and vocal criticism of the group leader.

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<sup>56</sup> “Volunteer for Free.” accessed April 3, 2012, <http://volunteeringforfree.org/blog/?p=29>

By the second week of the Volunteers for Peace program, the first blunt critiques of the program began to emerge. One volunteer, Amy, had fallen sick. Her stomach was not happy and as a result, neither was she. Unable to keep her food down, she spent the day alone in the windowless living quarters while the rest of us headed to the school.

When we returned that afternoon, I woke Amy from a nap and asked how she was doing. Though at first she complained about her physical symptoms, after a minute, she made it clear that the bulk of her discontentment lay elsewhere. In her weak, isolated state, her bodily discomfort had given rise to a series of other complaints about the program and its lack of structure and preparation.

“This isn’t what I expected” she divulged, “I wanted to do something, something extra, something special, but we don’t have the resources.” Amy, who had participated in another voluntourism trip the previous summer, wanted a more engaged role with the planning of the program, but when I asked what she had in mind, she did not have many specifics to offer. Still, overcome with the feeling that our work with the children was not achieving as much as she wanted it to, Amy criticized the structure of the program, specifically the lack of structure and preparation on the part of the group leader. This was a common sentiment amongst the volunteers, and as the program progressed, Teresa, the group leader, became a regular target of criticism and blame. After a long back and forth about Teresa’s incompetence and lack of enthusiasm, Anne interjected: “Teresa and volunteer work just don’t go together!”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Volunteers criticized Teresa for being late, underprepared and lazy. These comments reflect the all too commonly held perceptions of the so-called Third World, rooted in development discourse and the

The mounting dissatisfaction amongst the volunteers paralleled a growing fissure between us and Teresa and her family. This was exacerbated by the difficulty of communicating as a group, as some volunteers spoke no Spanish, while Teresa and her family spoke no English. As the days passed, the volunteers spoke increasingly in English, with less and less effort to translate conversations, sometimes even criticizing Teresa in English while she was in the same room. After an especially tense dinner, Kelly left the table to put Pedro, Teresa's five-year-old son to bed. She returned to the table, visibly upset. Pedro, who had become very close with the volunteers, was distressed, finally divulging to Kelly that his mom had also been speaking badly about the volunteers and had referred to us as *gringos de mierda*, "fucking gringos."<sup>58</sup>

Though tensions eased a bit thereafter, this dramatic culmination provoked the volunteers to further disengage with the program, putting less and less effort into both the group dynamic and the volunteer work. Our collective energy level plummeted. In the initial days, we had arrived at the school early, allowing ample time to check in with each other and prepare for the days' lessons. By the tenth day; however, we had been savoring every second of our leisure time, waiting until the very last moment to leave, reluctantly, for our work. One particularly gray day, enticed by a game of chess, we had procrastinated departing for the school to the point that Sarah had hurled a soccer ball toward the board, forcing an immediate cessation of the game and incurring grumpy remarks from the rest of us. As we trudged out of the house, Kelly

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assumption of Western superiority. Particularly egregious were the common jokes about "Peruvian time," which was slower, less active and less punctual than the Western pace of life it was implicitly positioned against.

<sup>58</sup> While the word gringo can have neutral or even affectionate connotations, in this case, Teresa's use of the word here was clearly negative.

remarked “I never thought that volunteers could be lazy, but that’s what we are today: lazy, lazy, lazy volunteers.” She laughed as soon as the words left her mouth, clearly amused by the apparent paradox we were enacting. This image, of the energetic volunteer had been confirmed in the opening days of the program; but as the days passed, even the most energetic among us had started to drag her feet.

Our efforts at the school became more minimal and, as a result, we were not receiving the same positive feedback from the children or Teresa. A long day of standing in the sun scarcely interacting with the children provoked Max to vocalize a pervasive but unspoken sentiment among us: “We aren’t doing *anything*.”

Yet while the common feeling amongst the volunteers was that we weren’t making “the meaningful contribution”<sup>59</sup> that the promotional materials promised we would, we were *doing something*. Although we may not have achieved what we hoped or expected we would, I echo Paulette Goudge’s (2003) claim that such “aid is not quite what it seems. It rarely benefits those it is directed towards and is never neutral in praxis” (25). In the following section, I will unpack this assertion, looking to critical literature on development and humanitarianism as a tool to unpack the effects that came with our presence, regardless of the ineffectiveness that volunteers perceived.

### **The Politics and Anti-Politics of Voluntourism**

From the moment the voluntourist steps off the plane, she is implicated in a tangled web of interlocking discourses and fields of power. Though she may come with a fresh mind, energy, passion, and the best of intentions, she is part of a pattern:

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<sup>59</sup> “International Volunteer Projects.” Volunteers for Peace, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://vfp.org>.

her body is one of many like it who have moved along the same path (Goudge 2003:20). Individual as her experience as a volunteer can feel, by virtue of her skin, her passport and her form of action, power is flowing in a recognizable direction. In this section I examine the unintended consequences that voluntourism, one benevolent practice among many in the expansive, sprawling landscape of international aid, can have on the ground.

Far from an isolated practice, I contend that voluntourism trips and the interactions they facilitate are informed by ideas of development and humanitarianism. As I outline, each field comes with specific institutions, beliefs, emphases and methods; however the lines between these terms are blurred, and their convergences multiple, as both “broadly seek to ameliorate and improve aspects of the human condition” on an international scale (Redfield and Bornstein 2010:5).

Fundamental to voluntourism, and all other international aid, is the discourse of development, which divides the world into modern and developing regions and provides a blueprint for managing the latter by the former (Pletsch 1981:567; Escobar 1995:12). As radical development theorists have argued, the now taken for granted notion of underdevelopment- a malaise that defined the condition and identity of the Third World- was discursively invented when the era of development was launched by US President Harry S. Truman on January 20, 1949 (Sachs 1993:2; Escobar 1995:6-7; Esteva 1992:3-4). The concept of development, which has since “achieved the status of certainty in the social imaginary” (Escobar 1995:5) and which underlies the global development industry, projects Western values and concepts onto the rest of the world (Sachs 1993:4), prescribing to the rest of the world how it must “escape

from the undignified condition called underdevelopment” (Esteva 1992:7) and justifying intervention, through aid practices, in the Global South. Arturo Escobar (1995) argues that development operates as a discourse through which certain realities are constructed for the people and nations of the Third World- as backward, poor and traditional- and power is exerted on them. He contends that development is defined by three axes:

the forms of knowledge that refer to it (...), the system of power which regulates its practice, and the forms of subjectivity fostered by this discourse, those through which people come to recognize themselves as developed or underdeveloped. [10]

The third axis is of particular relevance to this project, as actors on all sides of the voluntourist encounter know themselves and each other through the conceptual grid of development (Ferguson 1994). I will demonstrate that the pervasive influence of this “dominant problematic” is apparent in the language and actions of trip brokers and volunteers alike. Furthermore, given that voluntourism is constituted by young do-gooders traveling from wealthy nations in the Global North to help people in the South, voluntourism trips are clearly one of many interventions which is “sanctified in the name of [the] higher goal” of development (Sachs 1992:4).

However, voluntourism also differs from other development programs, such as poverty alleviation and industrial development prescriptions, in its focus on short-term, direct relief. In these ways, voluntourism trips more closely resemble humanitarian intervention, as they are imbued with the claim that “to do something (however limited that something may be) is better than doing nothing in the face of [human suffering]” (Feldman 2007:694). Like humanitarianism, volunteer tourism

attempts to occupy a “space apart” from history, politics and power, centering instead the imperative to relieve suffering in the short-term (Redfield 2005; Feldman 2007).

Of course, there are many aspects of volunteer tourism that divert substantially from both development and humanitarian frameworks. As I demonstrated in chapter one, the strange hybrid of volunteering and tourism has transformed aid work into a commodity; therefore, the explicit profit-motive, as well as the de-emphasis on qualification, skill or even nominal longevity distinguish the work of voluntourism from other forms of international aid.

Still, I employ development and humanitarianism as two lenses into volunteer tourism because of their multiple ideological continuities, as well as in the similar questions that they raise. Indeed, the growing contingent of critical anthropological literature on development<sup>60</sup> and humanitarianism<sup>61</sup> highlights a number of crucial contradictions, problems and dangers present in international volunteer tourism.

Of these bodies of literature, my argument in this section is informed by two works in particular. First, I borrow from James Ferguson’s The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho (1994). Through an ethnographic case study of development<sup>62</sup> industry in Lesotho, Ferguson investigates the ways that development discourses are employed and generated on the ground and the way that these discourse construct Lesotho as an object of knowledge (xvi). Ferguson claims that the “‘development’ apparatus... is an ‘anti-politics machine,’ depoliticizing everything it touches... all the while

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<sup>60</sup> See for example Escobar 1995, Esteva 1992, Ferguson 1994, Sharma 2008, Sachs 1992.

<sup>61</sup> See for example Bornstein and Redfield 2010, Feldman 2007, Minn 2002.

<sup>62</sup> Throughout the book, Ferguson puts the word development in quotation marks, drawing attention to the notion of development as discursively constructed, the values implicit in the idea, and its pervasive failure to “develop.”

performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation” (xv). The second work I draw heavily upon is Miriam Ticktin’s essay *Where Ethics and Politics Meet: The Violence of Humanitarianism in France* (2006) that explores the consequences of the 1998 illness clause, which “grants legal residency permits to those in France with pathologies of life threatening consequence if they are declared unable to receive proper treatment in their home countries” (2006:34). Such humanitarian policies, Ticktin contends, are presented as benevolent and “apolitical,” while still enacting political effects. Building on this work, I explore the ways that volunteer tourism trips, while attempting to occupy a neutral space can act as an “anti-politics machine,” sweeping political realities and questions of power under the rug in the name of immediate action and help. Furthermore, I argue that the unintended political consequences resulting from such “ethical regimes” can act as “one more expression of global power imbalances” (Goudge 2003:25), as they are ever entrenched in “larger transnational regimes of labor, capital and governance” (Ticktin 2006:45).

As discussed in the introduction and first chapter of this project, voluntourism trips are one of many commodities that offer seemingly straightforward forms of action to those with the impulse to help the world. Like humanitarianism, voluntourism trips are based on the imperative to relieve suffering, thus in their marketing and practice, discussion of the global power structures and histories which may have caused that suffering as well as allowed for the privileges that the volunteer enjoys as a member of the “developed” world are avoided. Instead, they contain an

implicit claim that the volunteer is implicated in the situation only as she has generously chosen to involve herself.

This is unsurprising, given that these trips are most concerned with the satisfaction of the volunteer. To be sure, with difficult discussions comes the potential for feelings of discomfort, guilt or paralysis that could jeopardize participants' realization of the rewarding experience promised. Moreover, in order to satisfy the volunteer-consumer, the volunteer work itself is planned with a number of considerations, to be fun, not too challenging, and offer quick gratification by engaging "the voluntourist in task-specific scenarios so people can see the results of their contributions" (Preisnitz 2009). As the executive director of voluntourism organization Global Aware affirmed: "We develop projects that are concrete and completable in one week, with no skills required" (MacNeille 2006).

To meet this criterion, the need that voluntourists attempt to mitigate is often be carefully selected by trip brokers. I was surprised to find that in both programs, the trip coordinators had actively recruited organizations to take on volunteers, rather than responding to requests for help. Christina, the ABV county coordinator explained that part of her job had been to find suitable venues that would accept volunteers. In Piura, Teresa had done the same, reaching out instead to local schools and initiating programs. For both Christina and Teresa, as employees of A Broader View and Volunteers for Peace, their livelihood depended on being able to find a rewarding, non-threatening location for volunteers to work. Thus, the profit-motive behind volunteer tourism trips and the privileging of the consumer above all else, requires the construction of an apolitical field, in which structural analysis is avoided,

and immediate, short-term action prioritized, whether that action is necessary and effective for the host community or not.

The absence of a political discourse enacts its own form of politics, constructing for the volunteers a particular narrative about manageable inequality and underdevelopment, consistent with the ideas about the so-called Third World which development discourse had already instilled in us. In the programs I participated in, we were shown inequity, as we moved through the streets, peered down from bus windows, or sat around the table in the homes of our host families. In these moments, we were being shown a specific image of “Peru,” and “Latin America,” which resonated with our preconceived notions of a “veritable underdeveloped subjectivity, endowed with features such as powerlessness, passivity, poverty and ignorance” (Escobar 1994:8). As Teju Cole argues in “The White Savior Industrial Complex,” (2012) the volunteer’s “good heart does not always allow [her] to think constellationally... to connect the dots or see the patterns of power behind the isolated ‘disasters’... all [she] sees is need, and [she] sees no need to reason out the need for the need” (2). Humanitarian interactions universalize and homogenize the so-called Third World, furthering our preconceptions about these regions without asking *why* things were as they were. Discussions about the historical, political and economic circumstances that enabled *their* lives to look so different from *our* lives were non-existent. The programs did not talk about the root causes of the “intricate and intensely local” (Cole 2012:2) conditions we were witnessing (or those we knew back home). We did not talk about trade agreements, corporate dominance, imperialism or legacies of colonialism. Even in conversations amongst volunteers, our analysis only

went so far as acknowledging that inequity existed. As Ticktin (2006) argues, such humanitarian work is inherently limited in that it prevents a systemic or overtly political approach to social problems (42).

The type of volunteer work we engaged in also contributed to depoliticizing the programs. Both programs were centered on building meaningful, albeit brief, relationships with children, either in orphanages or in schools. This focus on individual relationships between volunteers and “innocent,” “needy” children exemplifies the vague humanitarian imperative to relieve suffering and preserve human dignity (Terry 2002:17). In an outstanding analysis of the implications of humanitarian work in the name of children, Erica Bornstein (2001) examines the paradoxical space that is created through child sponsorship initiatives which emphasize the possibility to “transcend economic disparity via personal relationships” between sponsors from the Global North and children in the South (595). Bornstein demonstrates that such initiatives position children as innocent, “incarnations of utopia in humanitarian discourse” (601), who must be protected “from the harsh conditions of global economic shifts and the injustices that situate some in ‘developed’ and others in ‘developing’ nations” (602). Volunteer work in orphanages and schools relies on the same ethos, and children similarly “serve as depoliticizing agents in highly political contexts” (Bornstein 2001:601). Whereas other types of short-term volunteer work is more likely to be laden with conflict, disappointment and failures of communication, work with children enables volunteers to maintain and promote their value system and receive vague personal satisfaction from these relationships. Unlike the tumultuous and tense relationships between volunteers and

adults, of which the tensions with Teresa are a particularly potent example, interactions with children seem untainted by hierarchy and incommunicability. Even Tom, who acknowledged the limitations of international volunteer work, described working with children as a “way to avoid those problems.”

Despite volunteers’ general discomfort with the volunteer work, fleeting positive interactions with children validated their worth as volunteers. Though she had been frustrated with our work in the school on many occasions, at the end of the trip, Kelly spoke about working with children in positive terms: “I know that I won’t save the world, I’m not super girl,” she said laughing, “But just seeing the children’s eyes shining...I’m sure they will remember all of us, even if it was just one week in their lives.” As Bornstein (2001) writes, “these relationships carry contradictions and ambiguities,” which enabled intermittent moments of connection between volunteers and children to mask the pervasive feeling among volunteers that, as Max articulated, “we aren’t doing *anything*.”

In addition to the type of volunteer work and the institutional disinclination to having difficult discussions, other aspects of short-term volunteer tourism helped to ensure that political realities were whisked out of sight (Ferguson 1994:xv). The programs I participated in were marked by a lack of connection or attention to the specificities of the place they occurred in. Short-term volunteering, which can range from a seven days to several weeks makes it difficult if not impossible to gather a deep understanding of the specific history, politics and structures at work in a given location. Programs of just a few weeks scarcely allow for newcomers to learn basic features of a place, much less any sort of context. Moreover, with all of the volunteers

I met, stepping off the plane was the beginning of their relationship with the locality. Most explained to me that they had chosen Cusco or Piura, for practical reasons like cheap airfare, no visa requirements, convenient program dates, or most commonly because of a vague attraction to the indigenous cultures of Peru. As Rachael explained: “I saw photos of people in Peru and was fascinated by their colorful clothing.” Conversations with volunteers in Piura illuminated the same reasoning, though with a particularly ironic twist, given the vast distance between Piura and the Andean region. “I don’t know why I choose Peru,” Kelly said, thinking. “Oh, I do,” she continued, “Because of Machu Picchu!” I giggled as I asked her: “Even though Piura is hundreds of miles away?” Kelly burst out laughing before replying: “Well, I didn’t know that then...” Max had also chosen the program in Piura because of images he had seen of the Andes. Both admitted that they were disappointed when they learned that the part of Peru they were headed was radically different in geography, history and culture from the mystical “Land of the Incas” they had expected. Emma, by contrast, had chosen the program location completely at random. However, she explained: “as soon as I knew I was going on the program, I spent a few hours googling Peru, trying to learn more.” Like Emma, some volunteers had done casual research online after having been accepted to the program, but many came to Peru with little more than basic knowledge about the country.

Furthermore, none of the volunteers I interviewed had plans to return. On the Volunteers for Peace program, the children constantly asked when we would be back. Many of the children assumed that *of course* we would be coming again; however, from my conversations with other volunteers, it was clear that none of us had any

plans to do so. No one told the children this, at least not explicitly. *Vamos a ver*, we would say, “We’ll see...” However, when I concluded my formal interviews by asking if my interviewees anticipated returning, I received a fairly homogeneous answer: no. Certainly, talk about future travel, volunteering trips, and language study was commonplace, but none of us had considered returning to Peru, much less Piura. As Max explained to me one afternoon on a bus ride to the center of Piura, “I’d really like to come back... but right now I’m just sampling. This is my first time traveling and there are so many places I have to go!”

This lack of attention to local specificity has the same effects as the lack of political discourse or analysis: ensuring only superficial engagement with local problems and furthering volunteer perceptions of a homogeneous, ahistorical Third World (Escobar 1994:8) that can be improved by the unilateral application of a single cultural and economic model of development (Esteva 1992:16). The assumptions that “all people on the planet are moving along one single track towards some state of maturity, exemplified by the nations ‘running in front’” (Sachs 1992:3), that *they* should be and wanted to be just like *us*, remained intact.

As Arturo Escobar (1994) argues, this perception implicitly uses Western standards and values “as the benchmark against which to measure the situation of the Third World” (8). Stuck in these perceptions, as voluntourists we were constantly measuring what we experienced in Peru in our own terms, which are also globally dominant. This tendency was exacerbated by the fact that the coordinators of the programs not only encouraged these ideas, but also suggested that we apply these value judgments to our volunteer work.

This began on my first day in Piura. As we sat around the table in the main room of the house, Teresa began to tell us what we'd be doing for the coming three weeks. We were to offer a day-program for students at a local school, teaching English and French in the mornings, and offering workshops for dance, music and sports in the afternoons. Teresa emphasized that the program was *un intercambio cultural*, a cultural exchange, and encouraged us to bring activities or lessons from our respective countries to share with the children. Seeming a bit confused, Amy asked for some examples.

*Por ejemplo, ustedes podrían enseñarles a los niños cómo la gente en sus países recicla la basura. O sea, que la gente no tira la basura al suelo como hacemos aquí.* Teresa suggested, “For example, you all could teach the children how the people in your countries recycle their trash. Meaning, that you don't throw your garbage on the ground like we do here.”

Certainly, I had noted trash on the ground in our barrio and Max had even offered a snide comment about it: “Oh look, it's the local dump! Or, maybe that's a park.” In this case, Max's remark was overtly offensive and unproductive, but Teresa's more benign suggestion was not neutral either. Teresa was suggesting that we enter the school for the first time, knowing next to nothing about the community, or even about Peru, to teach children about practices that ostensibly reflected our superiority. Ivan Illich's (1968) critique that volunteers “cannot help being ultimately vacationing salesmen for the middle-class 'American Way of Life'” (3) seemed to apply all too well.

The power dynamic fundamental to “help” through teaching the “American Way of Life” is explicit here, but many have argued that “helping,” by its very nature is an act of power. In the anthropological classic The Gift, Marcel Mauss analyzes the social meaning behind the exchange of gifts, complicating a strictly utilitarian view of exchange and exchange value to argue that gift giving is not solely constituted by property, wealth or goods, but can also be composed of symbolic acts and gestures. Mauss contends that “there is no pure gift,” because all exchanges are laced with obligation, particularly the obligation to reciprocate (Mauss 1923:13). Building on Mauss’ work, I argue that as voluntary aid is nearly always expected to go unreciprocated, it is by virtue of the significance behind gift-giving an assertion of power by the giver. As Mauss notes in his conclusion, the unreciprocated gift “makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it... Charity is still wounding for him who has accepted it.” (1923:65)

When taken on an international scale, this act of power is not limited to individual exchanges, but rather, it is entrenched in existing discourses and structures. In the chapter of The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power (1992), entitled “Helping,” Marianne Gronmeyer demonstrates that helping is one part of the “web of key concepts” (Sachs 1992:4) that make up development discourse. No longer disinterested, impulsive or unconditional (Bornstein 2009:623), Gronemeyer (1992) argues that modern help through development is calculating, institutionalized and professionalized (54) and unrecognizable for what it has become: “an instrument of elegant power” (53).

In voluntourism, like in the aid practices, which Paulette Goudge (2003) examines, there is a common dynamic wherein volunteers consider their presence as “solely concerned with ‘helping or giving to them’” (18). As Goudge argues, “this assumption underpins and supports ideas and feelings that ‘we’ must be superior to ‘them’ because ‘we’ are always in the position of being the helpers and givers” (18). Thus, far from a pure or disinterested gift voluntourism and other development and aid practices can have a violent colonizing power (Esteva 1992:9), reproducing existing relations of power between the Global North and South.

In my fieldwork, the under-the-surface work of this dominant paradigm mapped onto individual bodies. Regardless of our background, skill or competency, volunteers were assumed to have something to give, even something to teach to young children growing up in a context we did not understand. Our nationalities, and perhaps to a more explicit degree, our white skin, marked our worth from afar. (Goudge 2003:11).

The day after our arrival, with no experience in teaching, much less teaching languages, we were each assigned to a classroom in the neighborhood school and instructed to give an English lesson. After about twenty minutes of fumbling with my lesson, the door swung open and Max entered. Even though Max did not speak a word of Spanish, he had been given his own class of thirty-some students and the same instructions as the rest of us. Though my imperfect Spanish and utter lack of experience running a classroom made teaching second graders greetings in English difficult, that Max's vocabulary in Spanish was limited to colors and numbers made his managing a class of students impossible.

In the coming days, I grew a bit more comfortable “teaching,” but the degree to which I was unqualified for the task was clear. In the evenings, the five of us reflected on our successes and failures that day and planned our lessons to come. Still, our incompetence was palpable and each lesson was a struggle.<sup>63</sup> Without training or selection, we were entrusted with a class of second graders. Our membership in the “First World” was our qualification and our white-skin our certification.

Assumptions of our value played out, even in the schoolyard. In between classes, I accompanied the children outside, seeking out the other volunteers to debrief about the experience of leading a class. I found Kelly first, standing in the middle of some twenty children, visibly overwhelmed. When I reached her, the sea of children parted a bit, so that we could face each other. After a brief check-in, we walked together to the far end of the yard, in search of shade. The herd of children moved with us. When we reached the shaded platform and lowered ourselves to the ground, the children did too, hanging over us, listening intently as we chatted in English. Sometimes, someone would tap one of us on the shoulder and ask a question: *¿Cómo se llama?* What’s your name? *¿Cuántos años tiene?* How old are you? or *¿De dónde es usted?* Where are you from?<sup>64</sup>

Kelly and I answered consistently and tried to ask questions of the children around us, but their sheer numbers made remembering names, much less other

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<sup>63</sup> Notably, we had gone in to the program with radically different expectations about what our volunteer work would consist of. On the Volunteers for Peace website, the program was called “Building a Better School” and the description had promised that we would work on “setting a roof, restoring the school’s library, and restoring some green areas” (Vfp.org). Certainly, we were not well-qualified to help with a building project either, but perhaps had the description and the reality of the program been more congruous, volunteers with some teaching experience might have sought out the program and those of us with such a paucity would have selected something else.

<sup>64</sup>The children always referred to us using “usted,” the formal conjugation used to mark respect.

distinguishing facts difficult. More uncomfortable still was when children offered us pieces of candy or cookies and one of the younger girls handed me a bracelet that she had made, grinning. I had nothing to offer in the moment, nor could I hope to give meaningful gifts to each of the several hundred children milling around the yard. As Illich (1986) argued we had not the slightest ability to say “thank you” for this hospitality (2). Kelly and I offered the givers a warm hug and a smile in exchange for their gifts, but our discomfort remained. What made us appear so special? What warranted such attention?

When we left school at the end of the day, we were absorbed again into an amoeba of eager young faces. This time, one child asked for an autograph from each of us. The idea spread rapidly. Within a few minutes, we had already given dozens of autographs and the line of children with pens and paper raised into the air seemed as long as it had been when we began. As I scribbled my name on one paper after another, I zoned out a bit. It was almost surreal to be treated with such reverence, having done nothing noteworthy to warrant it and I could not help but consider the implications of these interactions.

Our faces, brilliant white under the sun, were not particularly common in Piura, which was dramatically less saturated with tourists than other parts of Peru. However, faces like ours were commonplace on billboard advertisements, shampoo bottles, and afternoon television. Such prevalence ensured that our white skin broadcast our worth and our affluence. As Christine J. Walley (2004) demonstrates in her discussion of tourist encounters in the Mafia Island Marine Park in Tanzania, physical genotypes functioned as "economic social markers, with white skin coding

as wealth" (233). Following this observation, I do not believe that our whiteness itself accorded us such admiration from the children, but rather it was what our white skin stood for: affluence, power and membership in the Western world. Our skin then, "acted as a badge of convenience," ensuring that our value and competence were recognized immediately (Goudge 2003:11). In The Whiteness of Power: Racism in Third World Development and Aid (2003), Paulette Goudge argues:

The particular contribution of whiteness to global structures of power is divisive- in the sense that the whiter the person, or the nation, or the global region, the less there is to prove in relation to expertness, competency, or even advice and wisdom. [12]

Of course, as Paula Ebron (2002) and Talya Zemach-Bersin (2007) have demonstrated in their work on heritage tours and study abroad programs, respectively, race is by no means the only factor that marks foreigners, as black Americans traveling in Africa, for example, remain marked by their nationality. While white skin can be among the most obvious markers of a foreigner in the Global South, language competence, clothing, knowledge of social codes, and other factors can have equal power in identifying someone as a foreigner. That all of the volunteers I worked with were as pale as me, was just one of the factors that maintained our position of power. Our bodies, our backgrounds and our practice, ensured that our presence as volunteers was far from neutral. I argue, as Paulette Goudge (2003) does, that though our experiences might have seemed "purely personal, even idiosyncratic," we were part of a pattern (20), which, despite our best efforts, we could not step outside of. We could not escape our embeddedness in larger political and economic systems.

Even as volunteer tourism trips can fail to achieve their promoted objectives, the work they do is extensive. While voluntourism is positioned, like other forms of international aid, as a benevolent, apolitical intervention, our interactions remained bound by global hierarchies of class, race, nationality. This chapter has attempted to measure the “effectiveness” of volunteer tourism trips. In the first section, I analyzed the promises made by Volunteers for Peace and A Broader View in contrast with volunteer narratives and experiences. This analysis demonstrated the contrast between institutional representations that volunteers would “make a meaningful contribution to their host community”<sup>65</sup> and the much more ambiguous experiences of the volunteers I met. These feelings of discomfort call into question the claim that by virtue of their intentions, enthusiasm and nationality, volunteers have something useful to offer communities anywhere in the world.

In the second section, I questioned the sentiment shared by many volunteers that “we weren’t doing *anything*,” arguing instead that because voluntourism is one practice among many in a vast field of international aid practices, our presence was far from neutral or insignificant. I demonstrated that while the structure of the voluntourism trips I participated in were antagonistic to political analysis or discussion, our presence had deeply political implications. Drawing from insightful work on development and humanitarianism, I argued that the absence of a political discourse and the cursory engagement with local problems meant that preexisting ideas about the so-called Third World and power inequalities between metropolises and satellites (Frank 1969) and the modern and traditional were unintentionally

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<sup>65</sup> “Volunteer Abroad.” A Broader View, accessed March 6, 2012, <https://www.abroaderview.org>.

reproduced. These ideas consistently placed us, as volunteers, as Westerners and as white people, in a position of “elegant power” (Gronemeyer 1992:53).

Having questioned international volunteering trips, not only for their practical shortcomings, but also for their inherent paternalism and uncritical imposition of a specific ideal (that is, “developed” or “First World”) onto others, it is tempting to abandon international volunteering and its related projects entirely. However, in this project, I am interested in two equally weighty tasks: analyzing the problematics of volunteering trips and related international projects, as I have done in the previous pages, and second, imagining creative interventions into these mainstream frameworks and practices, which can facilitate the meaningful engagement that these trips aspire to in the first place. Only having worked through the first task, can we look toward what is for me, the most crucial: envisioning a more participatory, reflexive and transformative engagement across borders. Thus, with the cautionary words of these esteemed theorists ringing in my ears, with feet planted in the complex ground of my experiences in Peru, and with heavy weight of my invisible knapsack<sup>66</sup> as the constant reminder that my terms of engagement with this subject are still and always mediated through my position, I turn my gaze upward to the sky of possibilities.

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<sup>66</sup> Borrowing from Peggy McIntosh’s classic article *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1998), I mark my privileges, not only as a white person, but also able-bodied, cisgendered, middle-class, a US citizen, and someone with access to higher education. As McIntosh writes: “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious... like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks” (1998:1).

## Chapter 3

# Toward Radical (Cosmo)Politics Within and Against Voluntourism

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Toward the end of our stay in Tambogrande, Kelly, an energetic volunteer from Nebraska suggested that we change the course of our daily run. Feeling particularly adventurous, we quickly passed the three blocks to the stick bridge out of town past the crowds of people sitting around tables and the river, eating and talking. We felt stares and yells at our backs, unsurprising for two white girls running through a small town, but by that time, we couldn't even care. We found the road out of town, which spiraled toward the mountain in the distance and we sprinted up it. Talking, sometimes in Spanish, sometimes in English, we hit our stride as we broke out of town. On this road there were markers every half-kilometer that made us run faster and further, energized by the surroundings and one another.

At the 3km marker, we left the road and climbed up a dusty hill, completely on a whim. Though it wasn't very high, from the top we could see out in every direction- the town of Tambogrande and the Cristo Blanco which looked over it, both miniature in the distance, fields of crops I couldn't identify, cars and moto-taxis winding their way down the road, people in the fields, a trail of smoke billowing up from one property. Exhausted from running in the hot sun and overwhelmed by the view, we looked over the scene in awe.

Though we had been in the town for almost a week, the landscape we looked down upon still seemed so unfamiliar. From the peak, we watched the tiny people;

people going about their lives, people who we did not understand at all, and who did not understand us either. The world was so big and we were unbelievably small. Yet, there we were, sweating and breathing and connecting, somehow, with the place. I looked over at Kelly, this girl who I had known for a mere two weeks, but with whom I had shared a floor every night, games of soccer in the sweltering sun, and three meals each day. She was crying, silently as she looked out. We stayed there for a long time, drinking in the view, the sun, the delicious feeling of sharing something without saying a word. After some time we descended to the road below, arm in arm. It was Kelly who broke the silence. “The perspective of being here, its like nothing I've ever experienced” she whispered, “I don't think I can go back to my life and still feel bad or stressed or lonely. The world is too beautiful.”

Moments like this one were hard to define or explain. I spoke with Kelly again, on a Skype call, some months after both of us had returned home. She was not able to explain to me precisely what it was about the moment we shared on the hill, or the trip in general that had been so transformative. Moreover, she expressed how impossible it had been to answer the dozens questions like: “So tell me, how was Peru?” she had received back at home. Difficult to characterize as these moments are, their value can be significant. Kelly articulated that even months after, she was still feeling the ripples of the experience, in unexpected ways. “I have a lot more energy these days. I think that having been in Peru reminded me that there's so much to learn.”

Such an experience seems out of place following the two chapters before it, yet it speaks to a crucial component of my fieldwork. While I entered into this project steeped in the critical perspectives discussed in the previous chapters, with every intention to write an unforgiving critique of voluntourism, as one particularly egregious middle-class engagement in a deeply fraught field of aid practices, when I returned from Peru, things seemed *messy* more than anything else. My field notes were a mush of indefinable, uncharacterizable moments. Some interactions, such as those described in the last chapter, stood out for how eerily they illuminated a theory or critique I was already familiar with. Other moments stood out for how uncomfortable they were, for their ambiguity. Given the rising pervasiveness of voluntourism and related practices, as well as the acute potential for harm laden in them, the critiques I have heretofore highlighted are a crucial intervention, and have, I hope, been well represented in this project. But with equal frequency came interactions that complicated all of my assumptions. These moments of possibility challenged me to slow down enough that I might see the practice I thought I already knew with fresh eyes. In this chapter, I am interested in these moments in particular, and in how these trips can be *productive* of an alternative politics in and against neoliberal globalization. This involves lending attention to the potential that already lies within these trips, and imagining what could be.

I am inspired here by Sarah Gunther's (2006) critical and imaginative thesis on development in the Jewish Abayudaya community in Uganda. As she criticizes the paternalistic and apolitical aspects of development discourse and practice, Gunther makes a crucial qualification:

Rather than to entirely disengage with development and volunteering, instead the task is to incorporate these critiques of volunteering and development not into abjection or disengagement, but into new forms of engagement that strive for deeper connectedness and more egalitarian ways of helping through the recognition and deconstruction of power inequalities. [95]

Of the same aim, this chapter locates the multiple moments of possibility that occur even within such problematic trips. By pointing to these fleeting moments of potential, I make an explicit and intentional move from critique to reconstruction (Mohanty 2003:500).

### **From Cosmopolitanism to a Radical Cosmopolitics**

In chapter one, I applied the term cosmopolitan, as theorized by Ulf Hannerz (1996) to the aspiring cosmopolitans I encountered in suburban Ohio. Seen in this location, cosmopolitanism is a world-oriented identity-making project that is at once liberatory for those who seek it and problematic when considered for its broader implications. For individuals, making claims to cosmopolitanism can be an invaluable impetus for growth and self-definition, and sometimes a framework for pushing away from a home that might not fit. Indeed, for many I knew, including myself, the pervasive homophobia, racism and classism of Dublin, Ohio meant that it was not a place we could call home. As Ari Fornari (2004) points out, while home can be a safe space, it can also be a “place of unwelcome, closeted desires and impossible dreams” (15). For some, looking outside of one’s home or locality is crucial to survive and thrive. At the same time, cosmopolitanism can entail a problematically uncritical self-focus, which invisibilizes the cosmopolitan’s position of privilege.

Similarly, for some academics, cosmopolitanism is a framework in response to growing unease about the rapidly shifting global terrain and the concurrent rise troubling -isms, like isolationism, nationalism and imperialism, which divide rather than unite (Notar 2008:617). Cosmopolitanism here presents an ideology of hope, offering a potential “way out of uneven neoliberal globalization” (Cheah 1998: 38), through an ethos of connectedness and global engagement. Yet again, as much utility as cultivating a cosmopolitan identity might serve, as enticing as such a framework can be, as seductive its promise, this “continuous openness to the world” (Kahn 2002 cited in Notar 2008:618) remains situated in the same fields of power it responds to, shaped by existing hierarchies of nationality, gender, race and class (Fornari 2004:11; Hall 2009:345-346). Indeed, a cosmopolitan framework is prone to over-emphasize the possibilities of the universal and de-emphasize power differences and local specificity. When it presumes even ground upon which solidarity and connection can be assumed, this type of universalized global thinking is destructive (Mohanty 1984:337, Prakash and Esteva 1998:21). Still, troubling as universal claims like cosmopolitanism can be, I find resonance with Gayatri Spivak’s (1991) assertion that, “the universal is what we cannot not want, even as it so often excludes us” (Tsing 2005:1). Despite its limitations, I am not ready to altogether abandon cosmopolitanism as a political praxis, for like Ari Fornari (2004) “even as I want to problematize it, I seek cosmopolitanisms’ radical potential” (11) for reimagining the possibilities for global connection.<sup>67</sup> Instead of disavowing all engagement beyond

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<sup>67</sup> Almost a year and a half ago, my advisor recommended the thesis of one of her former advisees, Ari Fornari (2004). Fornari’s work offers an insightful and reflexive model for rethinking and resignifying cosmopolitanism, in a way that is attentive to power, specificity and difference. His ideas have inspired and informed this project in innumerable ways.

national borders, I am interested in imagining what more horizontal, accessible and transformative forms of engagement might look like.

Through auto-ethnographic reflection and analysis, Fornari traces the discursive roots of cosmopolitanism, illuminating its limitations in order to cultivate new meanings. Building on what Chela Sandoval's (2002) reference to a "dissident" or oppositional cosmopolitics (xi), Fornari proposes a "radical cosmopolitics" that disidentifies with cosmopolitanism's "troubling history and vexed connotations" (8). Radical cosmopolitics engages in critical, reflexive praxis to open up possibilities for a more "globally responsible way to live in this postmodern world... for countering injustice and sharing the love" (Fornari 2004:34).

I engage with radical cosmopolitics as a project of recuperation that seeks to reimagine the possibilities of interaction, communication and solidarity across borders. As Deborah Bird Rose (2004) describes it, recuperation implies a conscientious blending of reflexive attention to history and power with a resilient ethics of hope (24).<sup>68</sup> Radical cosmopolitics, then, moves to recuperate the exciting and necessary desire to learn about and act with others beyond our immediate surroundings, encouraging doing so in a more conscientious and humble way. Defining and enacting a radical cosmopolitics is an individual process, and I have no desire to make prescriptions for "the key to cosmopolitical transformation" (Cheah 1998:38). Instead, I am interested in using this framework to search for instances in which such spaces of possibility surface, even under the limited terms of a volunteer

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<sup>68</sup> In Report from a Wild Country, Rose writes toward an ethics of decolonization under which settler descendent peoples can forge a renewed relationship with place, without invisibilizing the violent and complex histories which form part of it; so although our projects converge at moments, her work is most relevant here as a model for analysis that is unabashedly critical, while always foregrounding hope, possibility and imagination.

tourism trip. Pointing to the moments within my ethnography that *opened up* these potentialities works to cultivate a radical cosmopolitics, within these trips and beyond them.

### **Volunteering for the Volunteer: Transformation on Slippery Ground**

Evaluated on the basis of their promises of personal growth and satisfaction that voluntourism providers offer their participants, the trips I participated in were enormously successful. Indeed, every volunteer that I met described their experience as something they were grateful to have undergone. The value that volunteers found in the trips varied, but most listed language practice, developing relationships with other volunteers and local people, and the opportunity to travel as the primary rewards. While these benefits are significant, personal growth for the participating Westerners cannot justify the potential harms, which volunteers' presence can enact (Illich 1968:5). I am less interested in these straightforward benefits and more in the unexpected moments of more radical potential.

During each formal interview with a volunteer I asked: "How do you think you'll describe this trip when you return home?" Robin spoke confidently: "You just have to experience it. You have to go. I think... this might sound silly, but it's been a pretty life changing experience. Really." Kelly made a similar comment: "I hesitate to say that this was the experience of my life, because its so hard to explain that sort of thing" she began, "But, I think it has been."

Given volunteers' ambiguous reactions to the volunteer work, I was surprised to hear so many assertions that the trip as an eye-opening or even life changing

experience. I was even more surprised to realize that I had come to agree with them. Going into my fieldwork, I expected my month in Peru would be interesting and enriching academically, but not personally. But by the last weeks of my fieldwork, like most of my assumptions going in, these too were shattered outright. Perhaps because of the summer camp-esque structure of the Volunteers for Peace program, my experience during those three weeks was fluid and fulfilling. Of course, sometimes I was an anthropology student searching for material, but more often, I was just another participant, making friends, learning a language, trying my best to make something out of the volunteering opportunity allotted to me. The consistency of the trip, made up of intense group bonding, constant activity and excitement, delicious physical exhaustion, and a sense of purpose, produced a deeply satisfying day-to-day experience. Moreover, having minimal experience traveling abroad prior to my fieldwork, I found myself constantly interrogating my own ethnocentric and developmentalist- First World/Third World- assumptions in a way that was both challenging and productive. Through the friendships that I developed with other volunteers, I am certain that I was not the only one to feel these transformative effects. In the following section, I unpack the potentialities that voluntourism trips can hold to politicize their participants, deconstruct provincial assumptions, and facilitate connection.

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Though volunteer tourism trips strive for an apolitical humanitarian engagement with an underdeveloped, less privileged Other, one of their unintended consequences can be to *politicize* their participants. After the devastating earthquake

in 2010, a contingent of Wesleyan students flew to Haiti to spend their spring break “assisting teachers, helping to register kids in camps, aiding in food distribution, organizing medical supplies, and helping out at an orphanage” in Port-au-Prince.<sup>69</sup> Though the group embarked with the intention of doing direct-relief work, they returned to campus having questioned the usefulness of their presence as volunteers and having developed “a more informed understanding of how the U.S. has had a negative impact on Haiti.”<sup>70</sup> This trip, like most others, was not intended to tackle the complex socio-historical conditions which allowed for the particularly devastating aftermath of the Haitian earthquake. Nevertheless, as a friend who participated in the trip shared with me, for these students the trip facilitated critical thinking on the politics of aid, inspiring them to question the utility of their own presence as volunteers, as well as the impact of U.S. intervention in Haiti more broadly.

From the interviews and interactions during my fieldwork, I do not know of any of the volunteers I met in Peru who returned home with such direct revelations. This contrast can be attributed to the fact that there was no easily discernable emergency that we were responding to beyond the perceived state of underdevelopment. However, considered in different terms, I do believe that both voluntourist trips had politicizing effects. A radical cosmopolitics is not just marked by comprehension of structural inequity, but also by an augmented imagination of what is possible in the world. As I will demonstrate, experiences abroad, including voluntourism, have the potential to facilitate critical thinking and expand one’s political imagination.

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<sup>69</sup>Markowitz, Aviva. 2010. "Students Volunteer in Haiti Over Break." *The Wesleyan Argus*, April 12.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

In an interview for the anarchist radio program Horizontal Power Hour, Anu Sharma and Gustavo Esteva discussed the possibilities of study abroad to facilitate radical learning and solidarity building.<sup>71</sup> Esteva argued that “particularly for people in the so-called developed countries,” time abroad can be a “badly needed” opportunity to “open their minds to other realities,” and their own implication in them. This process of seeing other realities, he suggested, has the potential to counter the pervasive idea that the “American way of life and model of society” can and should be unilaterally applied to the rest of the world.<sup>72</sup> Encounters with radically different ways of life muddle taken-for-granted ideas, including beliefs about what circumstances facilitate what Esteva calls *buen vivir*, living well.<sup>73</sup>

In chapter two, I critiqued the superficial interactions between volunteers and local “problems,” which often unintentionally reproduced preexisting conceptions of “underdeveloped” nations and peoples, as struggling not because of the unequal terms of neoliberal globalization, but because of some essential inferiority (Escobar 1994:8). But much as encounters with difference can remake hegemonic ideas of the “Third World,” cross-cultural encounters also hold the potential to unmake hegemony (Tsing 2005:6). In moments, these trips produced unexpected revisions to the standard narrative of a stable, ahistorical “Third World Difference” (Mohanty 1984:335). Rather than relating to the ways of life we encountered with pity or condescension, many volunteers idealized the simplicity and vitality of “Peruvian life,” in a way that simultaneously implies an oft-encountered imperialist nostalgia

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<sup>71</sup>Esteva, Gustavo. 2012. Interview by Anu Sharma. Horizontal Power Hour. WESU, February 15.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> In his talk at Wesleyan University, Gustavo Esteva used the term *buen vivir* to discuss optimized social well-being.

and potentially a reconsideration of what "the good life" actually means. Amy spoke often of how she had always felt as if she did not fit in at home, but had come to love life in Piura. Kelly affirmed this sentiment: "I'm happy back home, but here, I feel so alive in every moment. The Peruvian life is so good." Kelly went on to talk about the feeling of community she felt in the barrio we were living in, the joy she saw in the streets around her, to conclude that "everyone seems much happier here than people back home." In moments like this, fulfilling experiences seemingly challenged volunteers' perception that life in the United States or the West was superior to that in other parts of the world.

The effects of this alternative narrative are multiple, simultaneously remaining securely inside developmentalist constructions of the "Third World," and challenging them. It is crucial to note, of course, that the "Third World" is dualistically represented as a poverty-stricken wasteland and a secluded paradise, "unspoilt" by the troubles of the developed world (Walley 2004:231). The latter is a reversal of developmentalist logic, in which "the problems are located in the West while the virtues reside within the Third World Other" (Baaz 2005:155). That volunteers romanticized Peruvian life is consistent with other types of travel that seek authenticity away from the "developed world," by rejecting modernity and dominant middle class values (Miller-Howard 2010:64; Walley 2004:218). This nostalgia is not necessarily constructive, for it retains paternalistic undertones, implicitly developmentalist ideas (albeit in reverse), and a notable lack of commitment beyond the fleeting space of the voluntourism trip. Like Hannerz's cosmopolitans, the volunteers' embrace of Peruvian culture was only conditional (104): "while [they]

may embrace the alien culture, [they do] not become committed to it. All the time [they] know where the exit is” (104). I wonder, then, does this ephemeral affirmation of the life of the Other inhibit a radical metamorphosis in thought outside of the situational context of the trip?

I do not have a straightforward answer to this question. I do, however, believe that in moments volunteers managed to complicate both sides of the dualistic-representation of the "Third World;" and it would be reductionist to designate these perspective shifts as merely another incarnation of development discourse. This conviction comes from the way volunteers began to speak about their home countries. Since perceptions of the Self and the Other are relational and dialectical, some volunteers' experiences in Piura changed their discourse about their home country, which in turn might further shift their assumptions about the "Third World." Volunteers spoke about their own countries with more frequency than they spoke about Peru, often criticizing the pace of life, value system, and emphasis on excessive consumption that they associated with the United States. "The only thing I like about America is bagels," Amy said on the last day of the program, "Other than that, I'm not excited to go home at all. I don't think American is a very happy country." Even Max, who was one of loudest in his sarcastic, often offensive remarks about the neighborhood we were living in, the infrastructure, the trash, changed his tune by end of the trip. On a walk around our neighborhood, Max broke the silence between us with: "I wish more people would do this sort of thing," I nodded, but asked him to explain. "I don't know, if people could be here and see all this, maybe they would be more grateful of what they have, or maybe just not eat so fucking much." While

Max's comment does not explicitly challenge dominant assumptions about the "Third World"- in fact, such notions of gratitude could be said to reaffirm ideas of "First World" superiority- this appreciation has another effect: a newfound understanding of his global impact that transcended the duration of the trip. For Max, the process of seeing more of the world through travel challenged some givens, particularly conceptions of what one "needs."

Indeed, experiences abroad hold the potential to unsettle assumptions, or perhaps, to burst out of a tunnel vision, which can be difficult to see outside of especially within geographically and ideologically isolated nations like the United States. In the interview with Anu Sharma, Esteva argued that for American youth "to go there, to avoid this localized, this provincial shape of their hearts, to open their hearts to other realities" can be a crucial learning experience.<sup>74</sup> Through these experiences, Esteva suggested, youth can "begin to understand what was suggested by the Zapatistas, that we need to create a world in which many worlds can be in place."<sup>75</sup>

To eschew the provincial shape of our minds, as Esteva suggests, is to expand and alter our political imaginations. The idea of the political imagination is clearly informed by C. Wright Mills' (1959) conceptualization of the sociological imagination, or the ability to place oneself within one's social context and to imagine ways in which that context could be different (5). However, my familiarity with the term "political imagination" comes from its usage by Dylan Rodriguez and Gustavo

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<sup>74</sup> Esteva, Gustavo. 2012. Interview by Anu Sharma. Horizontal Power Hour. WESU, February 15.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

Esteva, during talks at Wesleyan University.<sup>76</sup> My definition of the political imagination refers to an understanding of one's location in an unequal world, a heightened awareness of one's potential as a political actor, and a more creative conceptualization of what the world *could* look like. Considered this way, the very experience of seeing a different reality, of seeing that people can survive and thrive under radically different conditions can expand the political imagination. In its most transformative moments, travel abroad can illuminate that there is, as Subcommander Marcos suggests, room in the world for many worlds (Sandoval 2000:ii). It is crucial to note that one need not travel abroad to experience difference, for there are vast "cultural differences within a locality" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:35). Moreover, it is feasible to cross national and cultural borders without encountering anything distinctive, as Paul Theroux (1986) describes of anti-cosmopolitan travelers who seek "home-plus," or travel without "unpredictable variety of experiences" (Hannerz 1996:104). Still, experiences abroad can be particularly powerful as a catalyst.

During an interview at the end of the VFP program, I asked Kelly what she took away from our interactions with the community we lived in. "I realized a lot of things," she explained. "At the end I realized that me and my ideas aren't the center of the world. I realized that life is really easy. If you want to create something you

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<sup>76</sup> Dylan Rodriguez participated in a roundtable discussion entitled "The Politics of the (Neoliberal) Academy," as part of the 2011 Academia and Activism Symposium at Wesleyan University. Rodriguez referred to role of academic work in expanding the limited political imagination in the United States.

Esteva gave a talk entitled "Beyond Development and Globalization: Anarchy and Buen Vivir" in 2012, in which he discussed the "ongoing insurrection" and the possibilities for collaborative, grassroots engagement. "We have been so concentrated in a critique of what is wrong. We are lacking imagination," he said. "Hope is not the conviction that something must happen, but that something else makes sense." "We need to reconstruct our political imagination to reconstruct our world."

can. If you wake up every day with your smile, you can create anything.” Kelly’s optimistic realizations dealt more with her own empowerment than what she had learned about Piura; a fact which is precisely consistent with what Esteva argues that American youth take away from time abroad. He contends that while travelers generally do not become “experts on Oaxaca or India, or wherever, they do become fully aware of who they are.”<sup>77</sup> This awareness does not just signify augmented understanding of oneself, but also of where one fits in the world- a consciousness that keeps growing. I am uncomfortable quantifying benefits and harms in the interest of some pseudo-objective conclusion about the efficacy of voluntourism trips, but inspired by the fact that even as fraught a field as volunteer tourism can offer these fleeting moments of transformation.

### **Friction: Possibilities for Connection on Uneven Ground**

Volunteers spoke proudly about the connections they formed with their host families, the children in the school, and strangers they met in the streets. This emphasis on interpersonal connections is provocative, as it suggests the transformative potential of relations “to transcend distance, class and culture” (Bornstein 2001:614). Still, these interactions must be considered in direct conversation with the dangers discussed in the previous chapter. In a world that has always been “hierarchically interconnected” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:35), contact is defined not by abrupt collisions across pre-existing, hardened differences, as some have argued (Huntington 1993), nor by seamless integration.

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<sup>77</sup> Esteva, Gustavo. 2012. Interview by Anu Sharma. Horizontal Power Hour. WESU, February 15.

To explore both the limitations and possibilities of interactions between volunteers and the Peruvian people they interfaced with, I am interested in using what Anna Tsing (2005) has named the productive friction of global connection (3). Tsing uses friction as a metaphor to describe the “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (4). Considered as such, global connections and interactions are not simply the continuous triumph of systemic power, nor of resistance, integration and communication. Using Tsing's conceptualization, I argue that voluntourism trips are a “zone of awkward engagement” (xi) in which the global status quo is simultaneously maintained and disrupted (6). I have demonstrated that the structure of voluntourism trips, like so many interactions across borders, often reinforces preexisting hierarchies, magnifies economic disparity (Bornstein 2001:614), and further entrenches the “naturalness” of development discourse. Thinking in these terms while traveling abroad power can seem totalizing, difference impossible to transcend. As a white skinned-woman, carrying an American passport and educational privilege, I often felt that my identities were salient enough to predefine every interaction I could have. Certainly sometimes, or even most times, they did. But even awash in a sea of power, we are not powerless.<sup>78</sup>

Even within the problematic terrain of voluntourism trips, I still believe that individuals retain some ability to complicate and reframe the terms of engagement and that even the most limited interactions can yield unexpected effects. As Tsing (2005) writes “friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can

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<sup>78</sup> By we, I mean everyone.

lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (5). In the following pages, I apply Tsing’s idea to a particularly striking interaction I had during my travels in Peru. While I have done my own thinking about the implications of this moment, precisely what the “new arrangements of culture and power” (5), that Tsing describes, might look like remains purely speculative. Instead, I ask: what are the possibilities for connection and communication across difference?

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After a week in Piura, our days had begun to settle into a certain kind of regularity. On a Wednesday, like the days that came before it, our alarms had buzzed at seven and reluctantly, we dressed, prepared our standard breakfast (bread with jam and butter and instant coffee), and walked the four blocks to the school. After three hours with the children, we paused for lunch. There was a growing restlessness, palpable, among the volunteers, but that Wednesday was Peruvian Independence Day, which presented a welcome respite from our routine. We left the school early to spend the lunch hour watching *los desfiles*, the parades, in the street outside.

After the parades, Elisa, one of the girls in my class ran up to me, excitement in her eyes. We shared a big hug and she asked timidly if I would come meet her mother. *Mi madre esta aprendiendo inglés! Le encanta hablar contigo!* She told me, “My mom is learning English! She’d really like to talk to you!” The hours between our morning and afternoon volunteer work often dragged on and always looking for opportunities to connect with people outside of the program, I agreed enthusiastically. We arrived at Elisa’s house, to find her mother and a large group of children playing

soccer in the sandy street. Her mother Sofía was tall, with a strong presence and light in her eyes. She beamed as we introduced ourselves. I did too.

She invited me inside and I readily accepted. The home she shared with her four children was one large room, with two beds nestled into a corner and small kitchen on one side. Above us, part of the ceiling was open, so sunlight streamed in, landing on our faces as we settled around the table. While apologizing that she did not have more to offer me, Sofía served a plate of chifles, fried plantain chips, and glasses of Inca Kola. Drinking in the room and the fluorescent beverage, I was as self-conscious of my position as she was of hers, choosing my words carefully when she asked about my home, my education, my travels. I had anticipated that our communication would be hampered by the vast gulf of experience between us, but after twenty minutes, the insecurity and cautiousness that I brought into the room dissipated. We talked about our mutual distaste for horror movies, the process of learning languages and her opinions on the enlarging tourism industry in Peru. Our conversation flowed seamlessly, as we spoke sometimes in English, sometimes in Spanish, laughing throughout at our respective mistakes.

Sofía had a warmth about her that put me at ease. Her level of English was comparable to my level of Spanish, and while we could communicate, certainly, grammar came second to transmitting our ideas. And incredible as it was, we had a lot to say to each other. I was surprised to learn that she was 26, only a few years older than me. Although she had never left Peru, she decided to start studying English a few years earlier. *Por el desafío, sabes? Para mejorarme a mí mismo, para convertirme en quien quiero ser. Para esto mismo, esta conversación.* She explained:

“For the challenge, you know? To improve myself, to become who I want to be. For this, for this conversation.” I nodded, for her experience mirrored my own. I explained that after 20 years without any stamps in my passport or another language under my belt, I had entered my junior year at Wesleyan feeling a strong urgency to learn Spanish. Grand as the distance between our material lives may have been, we found convergences in our shared experiences with learning a language and in the same inexplicable fascination with the world beyond our respective national borders. Our conversation flowed more smoothly than talking with some casual friends. I forgot, for the moment, the questions I spent most days asking, I forgot for the moment all that could have made such an interaction impossible.

That night, as I lay on the concrete floor of our shared sleeping quarters staring up at the ceiling, the interaction was most significant for the intoxicating pleasure of connecting in such a way with a stranger. I felt empowered. It seemed in the moment as if the power dynamics, which usually took up so much space in my mind, were not totalizing.

Back in Middletown, Connecticut, reading Anna Tsing (2005) at my kitchen table, my thoughts returned to Sofia with a slightly different bend. My initial excitement remained; but with the sobriety of distance, I remembered with startling lucidity the intermittent clumsiness that had surfaced between us. I remembered how when Sofia forgot a word in English, or when a chicken in from the garden strolled to peck at the ground below the table, her cheeks grew red. And I remembered how when our conversation drifted toward more heavy topics, it left any romantic simplicity behind it. In passing, Sofia had mentioned that her biggest dream was to go

to Machu Picchu one day and it had been my turn to blush. I had taken a day-trip to Machu Picchu the week before we met, and though it was a meaningful experience, it had not occupied much space in my thoughts, before or after. For Sofia, the two-day bus trip from Piura to Cusco with her four children combined with lodging and the steep entrance fee meant that the trip would be a tremendous investment. While the cost of the trip had not been insignificant given my tight research budget, my financial concerns were remedied by a brief phone call to my parents.

Though in moments our interaction had been smooth enough to feel refreshingly outside of transnational hierarchies, we remained inextricably within them. This was no triumph of global integration (Tsing 2005:5). Our communication was not and could not be untainted by the global divisions of labor and capital.

Awareness of the uneven ground<sup>79</sup> on which we met is sobering, but crucial. Attention to power does not preclude such connections, but rather, can foster them. Like its cosmopolitan roots, a radical cosmopolitics involves a willingness to engage with the world (Hannerz 1996:103), but demands an additional attention to hierarchies of power. Nurturing a radical cosmopolitics necessitates a willingness to mark one's own social location (Fornari 2004:16). It requires engaging not just with the "Other," but also with the Self; and perhaps, beginning to rethink these hardened, oppositional categories altogether.

It is through this engagement, this "rethinking [of] difference *through* connection" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:35), through this friction, that we move. As "a wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road" (Tsing 2005: 5)

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<sup>79</sup> In the same line as Paul Chatterton's (2006) reflections on the uncommon ground "where there are encounters between activists and their others" (259).

encounters between people, however clumsy and contentious, can propel personal change and perhaps, social transformation.

### **Come to Learn, Not to Help, or Toward A (Cosmo)Politics of Solidarity**

*"It is from those who have suffered the sentence of history- subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement- that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking."<sup>80</sup> -Homi Bhabha*

In a lecture at Wesleyan University, Gustavo Esteva, a fierce critic of development<sup>81</sup> and a self-described deprofessionalized intellectual, discussed the inadequacy of top-down social movements, and the possibilities for reclaiming agency in social change through imagination, humility and collaborative grassroots struggle.<sup>82</sup> During the question and answer section, a student stood and recounted his experience as a volunteer teaching about public health and hygiene in a community outside of Cusco, Peru who he described as “having been oppressed and ignored for so many years.” “How can we help them?” he asked earnestly.

“I have yet to meet a group of people who are *helpless*, least of all in Latin America,” Esteva answered. “Against everything, these people have survived. Do not go to help, go to learn from them.”<sup>83</sup>

Esteva’s graceful response has interesting overlaps with the concluding remarks of “To Hell With Good Intentions” (1986). Illich asserts:

I am here to suggest that you voluntarily renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you. I am here to entreat you to freely, consciously and humbly give up the legal right you have to impose your benevolence on Mexico. I am here to

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<sup>80</sup> From *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1994:172)

<sup>81</sup> See his contribution to *The Development Dictionary* (1992)

<sup>82</sup> Esteva, Gustavo. *Beyond Development and Globalization: Anarchy and Buen Vivir*. Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT. 13 Feb. 2012. Lecture.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your incapacity to do the "good" which you intended to do.

I am here to entreat you to use your money, your status and your education to travel in Latin America. Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to study. But do not come to help. [5]

Both Illich and Esteva emphasize that in transnational engagement, a fundamental shift in approach is crucial; yet neither crosses out the possibility of going abroad as a student, tourist, or individual in pursuit of knowledge and experience, nor the potential for solidarity and coalition based work. Given the extensive work on the ethical and political dilemmas of the tourism and study abroad industries,<sup>84</sup> I am reluctant to make the same claim without qualification. However, when put in conversation with my ethnography, the suggestion is intriguing, considering that the moments of possibility I have described in this chapter arose when the volunteers had dropped the pretense of helping entirely. Kelly's epiphany run, my conversation with Sofia and Max's changing ideas about the US, for example, all occurred when we were engaging as receptive travelers, rather than as volunteers. Can an infusion of humility mitigate the potential for harm in transnational encounters? What would such a shift look like?

Illich (1968) stresses to the prospective volunteers in his audience that all they "can legitimately volunteer for in Latin America might be voluntary powerlessness, voluntary presence as receivers" (1). This shift from benevolent helper to powerless receiver of knowledge disrupts the stark power dynamics laden in so many of the interactions in volunteer tourism trips. Perhaps, a humble acknowledgement of powerlessness on the part of the volunteers can create commonality with those they

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<sup>84</sup> For a detailed critique of study abroad see Zemach-Bersin 2007. For more on tourism see Enloe 1990 and Nash 1998.

meet while abroad. In “‘Give Up Activism’ and Change the World in Unknown Ways,” (2006) Paul Chatterton reflects on a demonstration to shut down an oil-refinery in Nottingham, United Kingdom, arguing that while such interactions between activists and “their others” (e.g. non-activists) occur on uncommon ground, there exist potentialities for dialogue and connection, through a mutual acknowledgement of powerlessness. Chatterton writes:

When trying to understand and unravel inter-connected issues seemingly beyond our control we all feel powerless. But for those without power, admitting a lack of power is the first step to understanding its causes and acting against it. [267]

Can this sort of admission on the part of volunteers work towards a humble politics of solidarity? As Esteva discussed the counterproductivity of helping, he paraphrased the words of aboriginal activist Lila Watson who famously said: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together”<sup>85</sup>

How is the liberation of middle-class American teenagers bound up with that of the communities they presume to help? Taken from a framework of collective liberation, in which the intersectionality of oppressions is centralized in both analysis and action, such a bold claim has viability.<sup>86</sup> As Dean Spade argued at the “Transecting the Academy” conference in 2004, “the circumstances we’re living in, locally and globally, are overwhelming, and we have to remember that there are more of us suffering under capitalism than benefiting from it” (5). In this vein, many have

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<sup>85</sup> Though Watson is credited with this quote, she has clarified that “she was not comfortable being credited for something that had been born of a collective process.” (<http://djterasaki.wordpress.com/2007/12/19/lila-watsons-quote-well-sort-of/>)

<sup>86</sup> See for example Crass 2004, Reyes 2002, Lorde 1980, Spade 2004, and Crenshaw 1989 for work on intersections between white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and the state.

argued that struggle against neoliberal capitalist globalization can be a framework within which intersectional analyses and politics can flourish (Mohanty 2003; Spade 2004) In this framework, it is possible to find linkages between such seemingly unrelated oppressions as homophobia experienced in a suburban high school and economic strain under neoliberal policies in the global South (Spade 2004). However, organizing around these convergences also requires recognition of their contextual specificities. As Chandra Mohanty (2003) argues in an essay reconsidering her well-known critique of Western feminists' discursive colonization of Third World women, feminist work across cultures must be attentive to both "the micropolitics of context, subjectivity and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes" (501). I am inspired by these words to delve a bit deeper: how might this dual focus translate into action? What are the politics of thinking and acting globally and how, if at all, could volunteer tourism be compatible with these ideas?

"Think Globally, Act Locally" is an activist mantra, commonplace on car bumpers in progressive pockets of the United States. Like Lila Watson's words, this slogan makes a substantial intervention into the grandiose attempts to "make a difference," but it too requires some complication. In Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures (1998), Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva contend that in response to the overwhelmingly violent encroachment of neoliberal globalization, locally-based struggles are the most effective and the most liberatory mode of resistance (1). As they demonstrate the power of grassroots movements to resist the monoculture of a single global society, the two wage a powerful critique

against arrogant “global thinking,” which presumes a comprehensible global reality.

They contend:

Since none of us can ever really know more than a miniscule part of the earth, “global thinking” is at its best only an illusion, and at its worst the grounds for the kinds of destructive and dangerous actions perpetrated by global “think tanks” like the World Bank, or their more benign counterparts- the watchdogs in the global environmental and human rights movements. [22]

Given the impossibility of “thinking globally,” attempts to apply a single model of progress onto any locale is an action as “uprooted as those of the globalists” (24).

I do not find this critique incompatible with a radical cosmopolitics. Instead, it emphasizes the necessity what Aihwa Ong (2009) describes as a “situated cosmopolitan[ism]” which is “at once particular and universal, anchored in [one’s] world and yet identified with other worlds” (41). For me, situating a radical cosmopolitics requires reflection on where I am located in the world, a humble awareness of my own limitations and the recognition that I will always have a lot to learn.

Rejecting the unilateral application of global aid and arrogant global analysis does not preclude efforts to learn from local struggles, both at home, and elsewhere. Although the voluntourism trips I experienced did not enact this kind of situated pedagogy, given that they deemphasized the significance of volunteers’ location and gave only cursory attention to the specifics of the host destination, I do not cross out the possibility that such a program could be more attentive to place. Indeed, I imagine that even voluntourism trips could forge a space to nourish a radical cosmopolitics, so long as the central goal were developing a locally focused pedagogy lead by those

who are already experts on their own lives, through which all actors could mutually work toward collaboration and communication.

Nor does Prakash and Esteva's affirmation of local action disqualify the forging of coalition across and beyond national borders in opposition to encroaching global forces (Prakash and Esteva 1998:24). Prakash and Esteva posit a "non-provincial localism" (33), which builds solidarity through alliances between localities. Again, I look to the wisdom of third-wave, women-of-color feminists who have critiqued the "insistence on common oppression, shared identity, [and] sameness" (hooks 2000:44) commonplace in claims to universal sisterhood, to consider the necessary qualifications of a politics of solidarity. These works offer a word of caution, as well as a renewed vision for alliances across borders, in which solidarity is forged, rather than assumed. Mohanty (2003) suggests that feminist solidarity must be built on "a vision of equality attentive to power differences" (502), and that finding "common differences can form the basis of a deep solidarity" (504). This is reminiscent of the "public cosmopolitanism" that Werbner (2009) argues for, which is an "inclusive political project of creating alliances between like-minded individuals and groups" (15). Taken this way, there remain possibilities that trips like those I participated in could implement a politics of solidarity.

Crucially, the nature of these coalitions cannot be articulated or prescribed, for as Ari Fornari (2004) so eloquently notes: "the usefulness of a disidentified, minoritarian, critical, radical cosmopolitics as a form of 'globalization from below' or 'grassroots globalization' (Appadurai 2000:15) depends upon the desires of the subaltern, and not the inclusivist offerings of dominant ideologies" (13). Bringing

together the wisdoms of Esteva (1992, 1998, 2012), Fornari (2004), hooks (2000), Mohanty (1984, 2003), and Prakash (1998), I argue that a politics of solidarity is contingent upon specific local struggles and must begin in the margins. This qualification further renders volunteer tourism trips problematic, especially so long as they are organized by the tourism industry or U.S. based non-profit organizations, rather than by the host populations. However, it also suggests possibilities for restructuring such efforts to center the voices, specificities and desires of those at the margins, rather than those of aspiring do-gooders from the North.<sup>87</sup>

To paraphrase Erica Bornstein (2001), I believe that voluntourism trips are not easy to accept, nor easy to dismiss outright (615), and indeed I have never been interested in claiming that volunteer tourism is inherently “bad” or unproblematically “good.” Instead, this project, and this chapter in particular have used analysis of this perilous practice as an opportunity to consider the possibilities and limitations of transnational solidarity and action. This chapter has endeavored to draw out the constructive moments that occurred during my fieldwork, in order to begin a critical and creative reimagining of transnational solidarity practices. For me, these examples

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<sup>87</sup> There are, in fact, many examples of this model in which organizations or communities have put out calls for solidarity and sometimes (wo)man power. Three inspiring examples are the International Solidarity Movement, No More Deaths and Mountain Justice. The International Solidarity Movement (ISM) is a Palestinian-led movement working to build international solidarity against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. ISM welcomes the involvement of foreigners, as educators in their own community or as volunteers in Palestine ([palsolidarity.org](http://palsolidarity.org)). No More Deaths/No Mas Muertes is an organization whose mission “is to end death and suffering on the U.S./Mexico border through civil initiative” ([nomoredeaths.org](http://nomoredeaths.org)). To this end, No More Deaths welcomes guest volunteers to “work side by side with experienced local volunteers,” though they emphasize that volunteering “requires two simple things: an invitation and volunteer training” (Ibid). Finally, Mountain Justice seeks to add to the growing citizens movement against mountain top removal coal mining. Mountain Justice encourages volunteers to come to the coalfields to help out. Multiple times a year, they organize camps, which strive to bring in people who can risk arrest doing non-violent direct action ([mountainjustice.org](http://mountainjustice.org)). Similar conceptually to volunteer tourism, these initiatives offer a positive revision to the typical structure of voluntourism, as they are locally led and organized and are defined by a formal invitation for outsider solidarity.

provide some hope and encouragement to stay engaged. Though in its current form, volunteer tourism is ridden with problems, I contend that the sentiments behind voluntourism trips and the types of coalition that they attempt to forge *could* be transformative. The task then entails continuing to question, to critique and most of all to imagine the possibilities for transnational activisms that are more productive, more collaborative, more reflexive and more radical.

## Conclusion

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One sunny afternoon in late March, I took a walk around Middletown with my friend Tim. Though well aware of the potential problems with international aid, Tim had spent five weeks volunteering in a school in Ecuador a few years prior. Intrigued by this blend of perspectives, I pressed him to explain how he made sense of the experience in the moment and retrospectively. “One thing I always remember,” he told me “is that whether I go to Ecuador or not, Coca-Cola and Exxon are going to be there.”

“Couldn’t that be a cop-out?” I probed, “Just because aid is more benign, doesn’t mean it isn’t destructive.” Tim laughed. “I just don’t think the point is to justify or condemn the volunteering I did or volunteering in general,” he paused. “No, I mean that our actions are never neutral, so its pretty necessary to keep trying to figure out what makes sense.”

Tim’s comment stuck in my mind. Noting the inescapable reality that the world is already interconnected, he maintained that even our day-to-day actions have far-reaching consequences. While I am not sure that I agree with his justification for volunteering, his words remind me that we are always already engaging globally, thus doing so actively, intentionally and reflexively is paramount. With this in mind, I write with the strong belief that for the “we” I have discussed in these pages, continuing to engage with the cosmopolitical world is crucial. As Dean Spade put it, “we have to remember our responsibility as people living in the belly of the beast,” for “many of us receive material benefits from the domination of others, that

domination is done in our names and we have the opportunities to access and oppose the decision makers who run this game that many people in the world don't have" (Spade 2004:5). I find strong resonance with Spade's contention that Americans, by the very nature of their citizenship are in a position of both power and obligation to provide "compensation for the harms that we have caused and are still causing" (Singer 2006:4). This tension between remembering our accountability and complicity in the violence enacted by institutions like the United States government and transnational corporations, and retaining humility of our powerlessness to know (much less act for) the globe, is uncomfortable, but deeply productive. In this ongoing space of transition and tension, I believe that a personal radical cosmopolitics can flourish.

This project has aimed to occupy this liminal space. I readily admit that these pages are a personal and political exploration, as much as an academic one. Using the specific tools afforded by reflexive ethnography and critical theory, this project has elaborated on the perils of cosmopolitan projects like volunteer tourism. These critiques are sobering and cautionary yet do not necessitate paralysis or disengagement. Rather, they can enable a space of productive discomfort, marked by self-reflexivity, humility and intentional slowness. Out of this space, I hope, emerges a willingness to stay engaged, to try, fail, reflect and try again. This engagement does not necessitate crossing borders or even taking dramatic action. Rather it is a deeply individual process, constituted by both action and reflection. Knowing that we are always in process toward a radical cosmopolitics and never precisely arriving at one, I challenge my readers to continue to reflect, critique, imagine, and act.

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Before I boarded the plane to Peru, I spent several days packing and repacking my large purple backpack. Over-packing could mean a heavy load and reduced mobility. Under-packing could incur trouble in a tight situation. So in search of the perfect balance, I made piles, I packed, I unpacked, I repacked, I unpacked again.

In the end, my packing job left a lot to be desired. My pack weighed thirty-two pounds, but I had forgotten toothpaste, a sleeping mat, a camera and enough socks. Instead I lugged around two bulky sweaters, useless for the heat, three books I never found time to read, and a computer I never used for duration of my five weeks days in Peru. Packing is an art that I become a bit more competent in each time I travel. Certainly I have not mastered it yet, nor do I foresee a day that I might carry everything I need and nothing more. Yet the prospect of a heavy pack and forgotten essentials has never paralyzed me from packing, unpacking, and packing again.

Cultivating a radical cosmopolitics is strangely analogous. Perhaps, a static or precise definition of radical cosmopolitics is as out of reach as the perfect packing job. But through process, trial, error and reflection, we can come closer to a politics that fits, at least for the moment. Today I fill my cosmopolitical backpack with humility, attention to power, interest in self-reflexivity, awareness of my own limitations and positionality, and a strong desire to learn. I leave my privilege guilt at home, alongside that extra pair of socks and any illusions that my presence as a helper is necessary or desirable. This backpack makes traveling abroad easier, certainly, but I use my cosmopolitical backpack most while staying at home. It is a reminder that I

am connected to others in ways beyond what is apparent day to day, and a tool kit for navigating every day as much awareness as I can.

Balance is essential. Too much self-deprecating reflexivity can be paralyzing. Not enough humility hampers possibilities for connection. Constant consideration of power dynamics is heavy, but crucial. A bit more consideration of the “micropolitics of context, subjectivity and struggle,” might take up the space reserved for contemplation of the “macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes” (Mohanty 2002:501). I pack, unpack and pack again.

What other volunteers carried with them to Cusco or Piura was undoubtedly quite different. They brought what they already had, just as I did. We all picked up a few extra trinkets and revelations during the trip, making our packs heavier on our return flights. Next time, we will need to make room for these new insights, new priorities and new ideas. Perhaps they will pack quite differently. I will too.

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