

Voluntourism: Exploring Ethical Challenges and
Critical Tensions within the Pay-to-Volunteer Industry

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ABSTRACT

This work aims to explore the ethical concerns and tensions embedded within the voluntourism industry through a holistic combination of ethnographic data and anthropological and ethical theory.

Declaration

This senior honors thesis is submitted for review by the Anthropology Department of Brandeis University for consideration of departmental honors to Jessye Kass in May of 2013. With regard to the above, I declare that this is an original piece of work and that all non-cited writing is my own.

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“You in American, don’t understand! Why do you even care?” Christabell raises her hands in frustration and stomps out of the cramped classroom we have been working in together. Throwing her painfully raw drawing into the trashcan on her way out, her hands balled into fists, Christabell appears agitated. I place my head in my hands and wonder: what is it that I am trying to do here?

This particular encounter with Christabell occurred after I had been working with her for several weeks, via a non-governmental organization in Ghana that I had co-founded in 2010. This foundation, Attukwei Art Foundation (AAF), is geared toward using creative arts as a therapeutic method of allowing children to tell their story. AAF works primarily in Accra, the capitol of Ghana; since 2010 the organization has worked with over 1,000 children. Over the past four years, I have lived in Ghana cumulatively for over a year through a series of five individual trips. Even though I continued to visit and live in Ghana, my feelings and conclusions toward my work abroad have often been mixed. Despite moments in which I never doubted aspects of my time in Ghana, there were many more instances in which I questioned my role rigorously and was critical of what complexities the presence I had created for myself held. In part, my questioning is informed by my academic concentration in anthropology.

Christabell’s words stung me, but pushing past the sting, I know that in part she is right. I may never understand. I may always be an outsider, stuck in what I have come to understand as an ‘etic’ view. Often anthropologists, or those studying the discipline, strive to hold an insiders, also known as ‘emic,’ perspective on the cultures they are observing, rather than an outsiders ‘etic’ understanding. Emic and etic were terms coined by linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike, who essentially suggested that there are two approaches to study of a society’s cultural system: either emic, as an insider, or etic, as an outsider.¹ The ideal tends to be an emic comprehension

for it allows for a more in depth understanding of the culture or community in question. After Christabell leaves the room I find myself staring at the ground and thinking that despite my attempts to understand, I will never have a truly emic perspective on Ghana nor Christabell's life. Regardless of my intent to provide a safe space where students I worked with could unpack their stories in cathartic ways that allowed them to heal, that was not always the case. My place as a white American girl, being able to afford to come to Ghana for months at a time before returning to the luxury of my American lifestyle created an awkward dichotomy in the relationships between me and those of the Ghanaians I have encountered. This uncomfortable balance between having a heart full of desire to 'help' and simultaneously needing to be aware of challenges and tensions within volunteering is a cause for a need to look further into this realm of volunteer service abroad. Specifically, evident in this conflicting balance it may be useful to look toward harm and benefit on behalf of the receiver of my own role as a 'volunteer' within a foreign country.

Though anthropological research and theory does not aim to determine what is inherently wrong or right, among those practicing the discipline there is a general concern for the impact on communities. The anthropologist usually strives to create the least possible change on communities, lest they superimpose their own (usually) western values. As anthropology Professor John Van Willigen offers, "the primary issue in the ethical debate is the potential harm which the activities of the anthropologist may have on a community or a specific person."² Willigen explains that this framework is relevant especially in the case of *applied* anthropology where anthropologists are using their understandings to benefit host communities. Cautious of cultural imperialism, and other concerns regarding host communities of anthropological research, anthropologists are known to be extremely careful about their impact. In addition to concern

regarding their own impact, anthropologists tend to also be concerned about the impact that anyone creates on a specific community. In relation to both my relationship to Ghana, and those of many other volunteers, I find it useful to inform an analysis of volunteering abroad through an anthropological lens. One that will aim to observe the impact volunteers are having on communities, as outcomes are important to understanding how host communities shift and react. Anthropology, as well as moral and ethical theory, can be particularly useful in understanding potential harm and benefits embedded in this volunteer service phenomenon.

Christabell, who was eleven at the time, shared her work with me. Her drawings and journal entries portrayed images of pain. Her human figure drawings (a classic indicator of trauma in art therapy)³ showed trauma and pain all over her body. Her journal entries outlined a violent rape. Beyond my comfort zone, with a lack of resources that I could provide, I was at a loss. With no formal training in art therapy, nor an ability to do much but listen to Christabell, I was stuck in my outsiders role wishing I could ‘do more.’ Yet, my place in helping her unpack her story could be part of the problem itself. The problem may not have been simply my lack of resources, but in my desire to change something in itself. Still frozen in the doorway, an idea for this thesis developed. It was the summer prior to the fall of my junior year and faced with Christabell’s reactions and my own preliminary anthropological knowledge I began to be increasingly critical of my role as a volunteer in Ghana.

My desire *was* to understand. But, Christabell had a point, I may never understand and in fact, my desire to ‘help’ could do more harm than good sometimes. Though several of my students expressed indicators that suggested they may have felt ‘more at peace’ after working through their story through art, there is always a series of ethical questions that follow. Even if I accept the parallel learning experience and know that I am not “saving the world” (as many

arrive under the false pretenses of doing so), there must also be an acceptance of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism, a key concept in anthropological discipline, asserts that since each culture has its own values and practices, “anthropologists should not make value judgments about cultural differences.”⁴ As a result, anthropology has emphasized that the study of cultures, in all forms, should be “value-free” and that the “appropriate role of the anthropologist is that of observer and recorder.”⁵ Though my place in Ghana did not begin as one informed by anthropology, I believe the necessity for a form of relativism at least in terms of judgment and actions taken is critical toward mutual benefit for both a volunteer and a host community. As such, my stress on the importance of a cathartic re-telling of a traumatic story is not necessarily what is best for Christabell or accepted within Ghana. Due to this, my presence and actions must be questioned. With myself, internally I battle wanting to ‘help’ and struggling to decide if even allowing space for Christabell to ‘heal’ is my place at all, or if I should have never entered the relationship at all. My anthropological mindset forces me to question my position as a volunteer tourist, yet my personality and heart desires to be a part of change that assists in healing while in Ghana.

Hence, being self-critical and aware of the challenges in voluntourism myself, I felt a necessity to take my thoughts on potential challenges and develop it into a body of work that problematizes an industry that is rapidly growing. Tourism alone raises many ethical challenges, but volunteer tourism, such that I have been involved in and otherwise, further complicates ethical issues and tensions that arise as a result. Though I may have distanced myself personally from more classical volunteer organizations that require large sums of money for a tailored, pay-to-volunteer abroad experience, I am still engulfed in this strange voluntourism world. An

industry that begs for more dissection into the ethical challenges that it brings forth and the various perspectives of those who are involved in the industry.

Through my desire to understand and further problematize volunteer tourism I developed plans for this thesis. This work aims to provide a thoughtful analysis on voluntourism by unpacking various perspectives in relation to the industry. Ultimately, this body of work hopes to dig deeper into volunteering abroad in order to further understand such a complex sub-culture of tourism and cross-cultural relations. As thesis informed by anthropology, through ethnography and theory, it aims to understand both the relationship between volunteer and host community, as well as the impact on the host community.

Sociocultural anthropology, which is the method in which this work has been analyzed, according to the American Anthropological Association, is specially interested in “how people live in particular places, how they organize, govern, and create meaning.”⁶ In the case of volunteers entering foreign countries, the structure of host communities is altered, creating an interesting arena in which anthropological theory can be particularly useful. There is significant work on how change affects communities and additionally how power shifts, in government, organizations, relations, behaviors and more can affect communities.⁷ Namely, there is particular relevance in anthropology toward volunteer tourism through the lens of power dynamics and outcomes on communities in particular. As well as, being informed by a desire for the anthropologist to hold an ‘emic’ understanding without imposing on societies. With the assistance of anthropological literature and ethnographic research, focusing on the different perspectives of participants, I intend to offer a holistic and ethnographic exploration on the complex industry of voluntourism.

Though there is much to be explored within this sub-culture of tourism, I have framed this thesis primarily surrounding ethical challenges. Of which I see many and have unpacked several into different sections. In this body of work, I begin first in chapter one by exploring the history of tourism and how volunteer tourism came into effect, while touching upon various opinions regarding the industry. Next, I open up into exploring broader ethical tensions, such as the desire to ‘do good’ without fully realizing potential for harm and an overview of what ethical issues have been discussed previously.

In chapter two, I discuss the ethical challenges through understanding how the consuming nature, (i.e. the volunteer paying to participate) complicates potential benefits through motivations, attitudes and actions of the volunteers. This chapter aims to understand both the selfish and selfless notions of the volunteers’ motivations, while framing it toward the ethical question of the possibility of altruism. Next, in combining motive and action of the volunteer, chapter two, through moral and ethical theory aims to question whether we should judge on the intent or the outcome, with specific reference to a re-occurring problem of entitlement and tensions on behalf of the volunteers. In chapter three, using anthropological theory on power dynamics, paternalism and neo-colonialism, I dissected the tensions regarding socioeconomics, privilege and the tendency of neo-colonialist attitudes to exist within the volunteer travel programs. Ultimately, between chapter two and three I aim to be commenting on the façade of altruism that can all too often turn to paternalism.

The final chapter takes a closer look at aspects of all of these aforementioned ethical challenges through the lens of racial tensions and the ‘white woman complex.’ A complex that aims to explain why white women dominate the voluntourism industry, and how this complicates the volunteer business. To conclude, I have offered a brief afterthought on how potential

concerns could be reconciled. Though I have come to no definitive conclusions, nor do I aim to, on whether voluntourism is purely good or bad, I do hope to examine the potential ethical issues embedded in the industry, while also illuminating the positive externalities in a conclusion that speaks toward the gains of the industry.

The necessity for this body of work to stay as objective and holistic as possible is based precisely on anthropological pedagogy in which the observer and recorder must offer comprehensive analyses. Ultimately, I believed it to be important to conduct this work through an anthropological discipline, primarily due to the fact that the majority of studies thus far rarely look at the opinions or gains for host communities.

Thus far, in ethnographic or otherwise academic literature on voluntourism, the current literature tends to be either positive or negative, without comparing different viewpoints of those actually involved. Yet, it is increasingly important to understand disciplines that create such one-sided literature with a more holistic approach. To that effect, anthropological theory (as well as ethical/moral theory) has proved particularly useful in the development of this work. This thesis aims to offer a comprehension of ethical concerns in a form that balances varying opinions and experiences regarding volunteer tourism.

In order to provide a body of work grounded in ethnographic data, I have used voluntourism in Ghana as my primary lens in which to analyze these sections of volunteer tourism. Since I had the most access to and experience within Ghana, as well as a rapport with Projects Abroad, one of the largest volunteer tourism organizations internationally, focusing my interviews within Ghana, and Projects Abroad, was the most sensible.

My methodology included varying participants in different roles, for this allowed me to provide a more holistic response and approach to comprehending concerns in voluntourism. Due

to most studies lacking data, qualitative or quantitative, on host communities, I made sure to include qualitative responses to voluntourism from host communities, as well as others. There were four key participants within the volunteer tourism realm (in Ghana and through Projects Abroad) in which I primarily interacted: volunteers, international staff, in-country staff (paid by the volunteer organization) and site supervisors (not paid by the volunteer organization). The volunteers I interviewed are current and past Projects Abroad volunteers from Ghana; the international staff are Projects Abroad staff working in the UK or US; the in-country staff are Ghanaian staff paid by Projects Abroad; and the site supervisors are Ghanaians who supervise volunteers on their placements but are not compensated or paid by Projects Abroad or otherwise. Through the process of these interviews the ideas behind my themes for this thesis came to fruition as I began to find patterns of deviating narratives between different participant roles and came to understand ethical challenges and tensions on a further level.

Though I do see a necessity to problematize voluntourism, my goal here is not to decide or argue that volunteers are wrong or right, or that voluntourism is bad or good, but rather to analyze how these varying understandings and perceptions work in a complex business that is ultimately advertised to be providing ‘feel good, do good’ programs. My desire to look at these various participants comes from my own self-ethnographical understanding in which I noticed a serious disconnect in narrative and action between the volunteers and various paid and unpaid staff positions that I encountered. Additionally, I aimed to unpack my own self-critical analysis of my own imposition within Ghana. Due to the disconnects I observed, between varying perspectives and narratives, I felt it would be crucial to unpack these unspoken accounts to gain a better understanding of voluntourism.

Voluntourism is a business. Within this industry in particular, many ethical concerns have been discovered in the growth of this business. Before one comes to black and white decisions about the field of volunteer tourism itself, it will be crucial to use these various personal perceptions of the on-site work and experiences as a form of truly attempting a comprehensive understanding of voluntourism. This work is an attempt to provide a rich analysis of these perspectives while also deeply dissecting concerns raised by such a complex industry.

Chapter 1

Tourism, Development and Voluntourism: A Historical Framework

History of Tourism

“My time here is a balance of tourism and volunteerism,” Susie reports, “on the one hand, I am a tourist - indulging in the ignored, but beautiful beaches of the coast, the national parks, the markets, the food and even the people. Yet, on the other hand, I am also here to help. I’m paying to help, yes, but here to make a difference nonetheless.”⁸ Susie is calm and collected as she explains to me how she observes the potentially opposing attributes that her placement through Projects Abroad in Ghana holds. Namely, she is holding both the truth of tourism and volunteering within her understanding of her role in Ghana. Susie is a twenty-seven year old certified teacher from Canada who was on a teaching placement here for her summer vacation. Susie’s goals in teaching in Ghana were to learn about the country, help the schools she worked in, and bring back what knowledge she gained into her own 4th grade classroom in Toronto. Susie was one of the older and more articulate of my informants, and her analysis of her betwixt and between position of volunteer and tourist is important to understanding the development of

volunteer tourism in the first place. As Susie tells me, her role is a “fascinating and confusing” combination that allows her to observe, indulge, learn and teach. As her conundrum is fascinating, for the purposes of this body of work, we will ask: how did this combination of volunteer and tourism intersect and develop across history? How do critics and supporters view voluntourism?

Tourism, originally rooted in selfish actions has now developed into an ethically saturated act that invokes many questions. In a colloquial sense, tourism is usually seen as a purely self-motivated activity with a goal of leisure and escapism.⁹ Though when one thinks of tourism today there may be a comprehension that different modes of tourism have erupted, as Susie has alluded to, tourism did not begin in this form. No longer is tourism simply travel for pleasure, it has now been complicated in many forms to include a variety of forms. Fortunately, the history and development of tourism follows a distinctive path that can assist in our understanding of how Susie and millions of others have found themselves on these strange volunteer tourism vacations, intersecting both leisure and benevolence. Yet, prior to observing ethical challenges within tourism, and all related industries, we must first look at the inception of tourism and development, before we answer further questions regarding its impact, tactics or alternative forms that raise concerns or questions.

Who is touring these countries and where does the root of this phenomenon derive from? Beginning threads of tourism go back beyond even the 17th century and back into ancient history. In ancient Egyptian history there are written accounts of travel to distant places, and new insights and further wealth brought back from such travels.¹⁰ During the Roman Republic, wealthy people would travel, if money and means allowed them to do so. Often wealthy Romans would be traveling south and residing on beaches in Egypt and Greece. The classical world had their

own form of holiday vacations, from summer health retreats to bathing holidays.¹¹ Travel continued as a form of both leisure, business and performance of wealth.

By the fall of the Roman Empire, touring parts of the world had become a part of societal growth. People became more and more eager to experience the world through travel and to educate themselves about the world. As Ueli Gyr, a German scholar, explains, “the desire to experience the world emerged as an individual, unique guiding principle. Traveling turned from a means into an end: now, one travelled in order to learn on the road and developed in doing so a love of travel and life that not infrequently crossed over into licentiousness and abandonment of morals.”¹² Importantly, this escape into beginning threads of tourism, provided for a new identity – no one knew you outside of who you travelled with and you could be anyone, with less fear of consequences for ones actions. The appeal of tourism and escapism was growing rapidly; it was both an educational escape and one for personal desires.

Deriving from simple holidays, a focus on more ‘packaged’ tourism seems to have arrived in the late 1600s with the beginnings of the ‘Grand Tour.’ The ‘Grand Tour’ allowed upper-class European men (mainly from England) a chance to visit parts of the world for an extended period of time. Ultimately, it was a symbol of extreme wealth and was seen as an educational phase in an effort to broaden horizons about languages, architecture, geography and culture.¹³ What differed from the ‘Grand Tour’ to the period of tourism in the Roman empire and thus forth, was now it was much more directly focused on its potential to be both an educational journey and a rite of passage. Tourists who embarked on the ‘Grand Tours’ of the late 1600s and early 1700s were, upon return from their travels, “supposedly ready to begin the responsibilities of an aristocrat.”¹⁴ Specifically, there was now a lesson in tourism via the Grand Tour. Tourism began to then complicate itself further, now it deviated from simply seeing a new place, and

instead was geared toward achieving a citizen readiness and acquired knowledge. Throughout Europe there appeared to be a gained realization that fundamental knowledge could be gained through travel, rather than simply a more casual holiday. In the organization of the Grand Tour, routes, sequences and itinerary were planned rather extensively with educational programming built in for the elite young men fortunate enough to embark on these extensive travel missions.¹⁵ During the Enlightenment, this period of structured travel continued to exist and grow. At this point in the early 1800s, traveling for leisure was well known and these previous growth periods for travel were seen as the developmental or ‘early’ stages of modern tourism.¹⁶

Modern tourism, continuing along the lines of more planned and packaged trips, had a slow rise following the Grand Tour and other such touristic attractions throughout Europe. The mid-1800s provided those with means access to several railways, which further increased travel for pleasure as well as travel for other endeavors. Several small tourist companies began to pop up throughout the early and mid-19th century, but none were all too successful.¹⁷ Modern tourism in the mid-19th century began to closer resemble tourism of today in its increase of affordability for the middle class. Despite touring the world still being a luxury for many then and today, the late 1800s showed an increase in diversity between those embarking on trips. Additionally, just as tourism had been escapism before (and frankly can still be seen as such) tourism in the mid-19th century was indulgent and knowledge boosting.

During this time, there were little studies done on the effects of tourism and almost no responses from the middle to upper class Westerners commenting on concerns of such a rapidly increasing industry. Those who could afford it were enjoying its many amenities and self-benefits without worrying about impact. As Gyr says, “this traveling acted as a form of middle-class self-therapy, the removal of the middle-class self from its existence in the shadow of the

old aristocratic world in order to learn about modernity via a paradigmatic experience.”¹⁸

Saliently, as with tourism today, much of travel in the late 19th century was a way of escape from reality and pressures of every day life. Comprehending these early tourists motivations toward escapism, although not the only reason, is important in contemplating whether or not tourists were cognizant of their impact on host locations – as well as how perspectives of the host communities perceived these tourists. Did tourists of this time have an ethical duty to understand the perspective of those they were touring? As we move forward in the historical framework of tourism, it is crucial to be introspective regarding not only the experiences of the tourists, but of the places being toured as well.

As tourism developed, in the spirit of entrepreneurship, traveling for knowledge, and the leisure class seemingly desiring to be taken care of, the tourism industry in the mid-1800s was characterized by a capitalization on these factors. As railways became more plentiful in the 1840s, Thomas Cook, a middle class Englishman, developed an incredible business idea. An idea that offered pre-prepared vacations aimed at educating participants through travel. The idea was to create travel packages that promoted a sense of social responsibility in line with the values of society at the time.¹⁹ Namely, Cook believed that this ‘social responsibility’ was learning about other cultures, yet in a structured and safe way that allowed for the same luxuries as back home.²⁰ What began first as simply a chartered train excursion with all-inclusive amenities, blossomed into a leisure tourism business. Cook’s business took groups of people on excursions to different locations in Europe and would return them to England after a set amount of days.²¹

Cook is often referred to as the inventor of packaged tourism, specifically for his ability to cut travelers costs and have all-inclusive benefits. Cook was a brilliant entrepreneur and used media to his advantage, he was “inspired by clear socio-political motives, [and] wanted to use

excursions to tempt workers out of the misery and alcoholism of the cities in the green of the countryside.”²² As stated by Cook’s goals, it is clear that Cook saw what Gyr argued about escapism, in the sense that motivations for tourism, even if unknown until advertised, could be directly related to a desire to escape from reality. However, rather than earlier tourism, which had been for wealthy elite only, now even more of the middle class was able to travel; travel outside of their own situations into an escapist place on an inclusive trip chartered by an organization. Under Cook, widespread tourism began to flourish as masses of people began to enjoy, afford and embark on tourist journeys across city and country lines.

As tourism grew, various ‘branches’ of tourism began to develop as different forms began to proliferate across the globe. In the late 19th century, the Alps mountains opened up for public consumption, and eco-tourism, though not yet coined as that term, was born. Environmental tourism was both romanticized and cause for an ethical understanding of tourism. Eco-tourism, as it grew, became more than simply being in nature but rather aimed to minimize impact on communities toured and was geared toward providing sustainable benefits to an environment.²³ Rather than simply packaged tours for pleasure or education, by the mid-20th century, eco-tourism was a leading form that caused for an ethical understanding of impacts in tourism.²⁴ Eco-tourism was one of many new developments toward the dozens of forms of tourism that are accepted and exist today. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, the combination of eco-tourism, historical travel for pleasure and Cook’s packaged excursions caused a significant increase in the commonality of tourism and those who could afford it. As mass tourism became more popularized, there became more of a need to regulate it, as people realized there could be potentially harmful issues to the environments being toured, both in physical and social respects.

As challenges developed in tourism and there were more concerns about its impact on nations, both positive and negative, but relating mostly to goals and regulations, the United Nations decided to take a stand. In the beginning of 1925, the World Tourism Organization was founded through the UN as an attempt to secure safe tourism and improve cross-cultural understandings.²⁵ The UN believed that an understanding of both the toured and the tourist would allow for stronger relations between countries, furthering the strength of the UN and global relations. Tourism was to improve cross-cultural understandings simply through the exchanges, but as to who was understanding whom and at what level, that was unclear.²⁶ In addition to cultivating relationships, the UN was dedicated to understanding potential economic gains for countries with the highest traffic. Ultimately, the decision to create this branch of the UN was motivated toward both cultural benefits, as well as economic fluidity and development.

Following the first World War, packaged travel tours developed as methods of escape from the devastation of the war, allowing residents of war-torn countries to experience some leisurely escape. Where the beginning threads of tourism had been more focused on educational grounds or a bit of leisure holiday, now with Cook and post-war packaged deals, tourism was growing as a large industry that realized the potential for economic and consumer gains in such an business.²⁷ Namely, although the packaged tours geared toward those affected by the war were advertised as escapism, in actuality it was an attempt to provide consumerism in other countries desperately in need of rebuilding. Businesses realized that tourism could assist in rebuilding the infrastructure of their country by providing economic growth.

Since its inception in 1925, the United Nations World Tourism Organization, (UNWTO) has progressed rapidly and is now an active force in tourism development across the globe. In UNWTO's mission statement they promote tourism as a mode of "economic growth, inclusive

development and environmental sustainability.”²⁸ namely, the mission is to support sustainable development within each country that allows for contributions from both the tourist and the toured. Although obviously not as neatly mapped onto how tourism plays out, the shift to understanding a need for regulation was crucial as social awareness began to grow. As offered in the UNWTO mission statement, economics and sustainability now played a significant role in tourism. Whereas historical notions of tourism were more educational for the tourist, and less for the host of tourists, now, UNWTO and others recognize the necessity of tourism in our globalized economy as an important facet of economic stability in a country.

UNWTO recognized the facets of globalization and industrialization across the world and used these new growths for platforms of understanding and developing tourism further. According to annual UNWTO reports recorded in studies, “tourism is the number one industry in many countries and one of the world’s most important sources of employment.”²⁹ With destruction from wars, economic gains became crucial to many countries. In fact, many countries today depend on the economic stability that tourism brings. Though the countries that depend most on tourism are small islands such as the Cayman Islands or Bermuda, there are several larger and ‘developing’ countries that also depend on the economic stability that tourism provides.³⁰

As consumerism and globalization further extended its wings, there came an comprehension among some to investigate what ethical challenges tourism held. In the mid-1900s, UNWTO drafted a global code of ethics for tourism in an attempt to adhere to some of the concerns that both tourists and host countries were encountering upon their travels.³¹ With many countries today now depending on tourism for the fundamental success of their country, it can be exceedingly difficult to keep up with ethical notions. Yet, with a lack of understanding of

what potential problems can occur, such as harming the environment, or being culturally insensitive or otherwise, tourism, of all forms, can cause rifts between the host locations and the tourists, despite a necessity for their business.

As ethical investigators, in the mid-1900s when anthropology became a more readily active discipline, anthropologists began to look into tourism as an industry, but with caution. Anthropologically, tourism has been seen usually through either a historical lens or in an ethical framework.³² In such a viewpoint many anthropologists were originally reluctant to recognize tourism as a form worth studying, because it was all too similar to their own work. Anthropologists saw their work as serious and research based, where as they discerned tourism as purely for leisure and self-indulgent.³³ However, despite a desire for anthropologists to be categorized differently than those of tourist status, there are arguably similarities. As Amanda Stronza, of Stanford University points out, “both [anthropologists and tourists] spend time exploring the cultural productions and rituals of society, and both carry the status of outsider as they make forays into the lives of others.”³⁴ Arguably, Stronza articulates a critical point, especially in reaffirming the emic versus etic debate, which could place anthropologists consistently in an etic framework, just as tourists. Now, regardless of whether tourists are of a similar caliber to anthropologists, what was important in these beginning anthropological studies of tourism were ethnographic accounts of tourism. Accounts that allowed for a more holistic understanding than simply the consumer or escapist aspect of tourism, and also allowed for growth.

Today, in 2013, if you search for different modes of tourism, there will be lists of nearly a hundred alternate forms of tourism.³⁵ As tourism became more widely researched, not just by anthropologists, but by economists, advertisers, travel agencies and more, not only did more

ethical issues arise, but additional branches developed. The media then became crucial in all branches of tourism, which caused for an increase in development of alternative modes. Now, the term tourism is heard in a variety of different contexts throughout the world, but ultimately most will understand the general term to mean one who visits a place different from where they reside, often for the purpose of exposure and leisure. As tourism has grown over the past two hundred plus centuries various sects of tourism have erupted and grown in popularity. From business to eco-tourism to sustainable tourism to sex tourism and beyond, there are numerous different forms of being an outsider, observing, and participating in other locales.

By the mid-20th century, touristic travel with amenities tied into the process was well established. Beginning with Cook's all-inclusive trips, other social entrepreneurs capitalized on and developed this sect of tourism further into pre-packaged trips toward easier, more affordable modes of tourist travel. As these tourist programs became more popular especially following both World Wars, a social awareness of issues, both domestic and abroad also developed through media awareness, social consciousness, and focused organizations. This new social awareness brought about groups of people who were determined to change aspects of the world we lived in. Indeed there was then a desire to do *more* than "just tour."³⁶ Through social awareness, non-governmental organizations, government programming and this one-hundred year run of pre-packaged tourism, came a new form of tourism, which we will call 'voluntourism,' though it is also referred to as volunteer travel or volunteer tourism.

Voluntourism: The Beginning

Specifically, voluntourism refers to the phenomenon of paying to volunteer abroad, usually on pre-packaged excursions. In most cases, participants will pay a fee to an international

or local organization, and the company will place them on a variety of projects, based on preference, generally ranging from education to health to human rights. These organized trips usually provide room and board, insurance, and in-country support from local or international staff, in addition to the volunteer project itself. Millions of people from Europe and the United States have engaged in these volunteer travel projects.³⁷ Generally, people from wealthier countries such as, Europe, Canada, Australia and the United States account for the majority of volunteers participating in these programs.³⁸ Most volunteer programs are based in Asia, Africa and Latin America.³⁹ The founding principle behind volunteer tourism seems to have begun through social awareness, taking tourism beyond just a visit and focusing on ‘giving back’ to a community.⁴⁰ Although volunteer tourism has no official founding date, most sources agree that it essentially dates back to the 1950s, yet in what form there is some debate about its origins.

Some sources state that a 1958 organization, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), founded by Alec and Mora Dickson was the beginning of voluntourism.⁴¹ The original mission of VSO was to bring qualified volunteers from Europe and the United States to various countries in need of relief efforts. Originally, in Alec and Mora Dickson’s VSO organization, it was advertised only for males. Quickly within ten years, VSO had brought over 1,400 volunteers overseas. During this time period the need for qualifications to work in such countries seemed to dwindle, just as they have today in volunteer travel as well. Originally, qualifications for work in VSO included several years of experience, but quickly by the 1980s VSO found that they brought more and more “unskilled” volunteers.⁴² Ultimately, the vision for VSO was a world without poverty. In order to accomplish such a goal, VSO founders believed that by bringing outside resources, namely volunteers paying, into struggling countries, it not only benefitted those economies, but it additionally benefitted on-site work in hospitals, schools, and businesses.

Although VSO still exists today as a form of volunteer tourism, it is by no means the number one brand name in voluntourism any longer.⁴³

In addition to VSO being attributed toward a founding father of volunteer tourism, many attribute the 1961 founding of the U.S. Peace Corps, established during the John F. Kennedy administration, as being another turning point in trajectory of volunteer travel.⁴⁴ In 1961, President John F. Kennedy stood on the steps at the University of Michigan and challenged students to take two years of their lives to reside and work in developing countries. Kennedy's speech was the needed inspiration toward a federal government agency that then dedicated itself to "world peace and friendship."⁴⁵ Since 1961, the Peace Corps has brought almost a quarter of a million people on service trips for a set period of twenty-seven months to various developing countries across the globe.⁴⁶

What sets the Peace Corps apart from other forms of more popularized voluntourism is the stipend provided and monetary reward upon completion of the twenty-seven months. In comparison, most volunteer travel programs today generally range from two weeks to six months on average, and almost all require a hefty fee to participate. Yet, the creation of the Peace Corps does explore an important facet of tourism history in which a beloved President demanded our college graduates 'do good' for the world. This movement toward social consciousness and activism has definitely factored into the profitable voluntourism business. Ultimately, although complicated by the fee to serve, volunteer tourism does have a focus on doing social good, rather than simply observing and soaking in the surroundings. It is an active form of tourism, derived in part from the core goals of the Peace Corps, despite differences. The Peace Corps, though diverse in its essential construction does hold the same desire for social consciousness and volunteer work, and its inception was arguably fundamental to the outbreak of volunteer tourism.

Building off these foundations of volunteer service of VSO and the Peace Corps, in the 1970s there was an increase in study abroad programs, which allowed for more educational tourism, in a more organized form than historical notions of educational tourism.⁴⁷ While on these study abroad trips, many students chose to volunteer or intern with local organizations in their host countries. The proliferation of study abroad programs allowed for having more youth involved in the global sphere, as well as motivating youth toward an increased excitement regarding exploring foreign countries on a deeper, more culturally understanding level.⁴⁸ During the study abroad boom, in 1971, Earthwatch, a volunteer travel organization dedicated to scientific research, led the first recognized ‘volunteer vacation.’ A vacation trip that most closely mirrors what volunteer tourism generally looks like today.⁴⁹

Following these shifts in the tourism industry, the 1990s were marked by the travel industry capitalizing on the popularity of these new volunteer vacations. During this period, in 1992, Bill McMillon published “Volunteer Vacations,” now in its 8th edition and entitled, “Volunteer Vacations: Short-term Adventures that will Benefit You and Others.”⁵⁰ His book, now co-written with two others, originally provided a list of hundreds of non-profit organizations that were dedicated to volunteer service opportunities. His book was well received and contributed to an inspiration for many more international volunteer tourism industries to develop. Industry here is a key word. Voluntourism was becoming a business, one that was profitable and benefited both the consumer and the host locations where volunteers chose to volunteer. Steering away from specific goals such as ending poverty like VSO, or world peace as with the Peace Corps, volunteer travel by the 1990s took on a leisure role that intertwined tourism more directly with volunteering for personal gain as well as contributing to society. By the beginning of the

21st century, voluntourism was an established industry, with hundreds of thousands of mostly eighteen to twenty-five year olds embarking on these constructed volunteer vacations.

As this industry began to grow to where it is today, with currently more than 800 organizations offering volunteer placements in over 200 countries,⁵¹ a focus on international volunteer tourism, both in popularity and in ethical concerns, has become a prevalent form of service. Volunteer tourism, especially outside ones' own country, shifts the focus of tourism from purely selfish toward a new attribute of reciprocity, and almost toward a potential altruistic nature. However, as volunteer tourism grew from the 1960s through the 1990s and most rapidly in the past twenty-plus years, there were more concerns about the potential for benevolence versus self-interest. As Alastair MacInyre, an ethical philosopher, ponders, "what is the relationship between selfishness and benevolence? Is altruism merely a mask for self-interest?"⁵² Namely, as with any altruistic nature, it is crucial to tread carefully and unpack all ethical concerns regarding supposed altruistic behavior that is perhaps under different motives. Tourism was originally rooted in selfishness, yet by the late 20th century there is a recorded shift, further complicating this industry. These volunteer vacations could be seen as both benevolent and motivated in self-interest – which begs us to comprehend the complications and progression further, specifically in dissecting what ethical concerns could erupt from this growing trend.

In addition to ethical concerns in regards to motivations, the focus on the 'exotic' other in traveling to foreign countries has quickly become a aspect in these volunteer tourism projects. As of 2012, the top four most popular countries for volunteer placements were India, South Africa, Thailand and Haiti.⁵³ Traveling abroad is perhaps not only exciting in its unfamiliarity aspect, but it potentially holds more reason for its popularity than simply difference from the norm. Perhaps, there is something both safe and exciting about volunteering abroad. Exciting, in its

exotic nature, it is different and outside of what one knows; and safe, in that the volunteer is able to return home to their home country and leave behind whatever aspects of their trip they want to forget. This is perhaps why popularity has increased in international volunteering so rapidly, as it provides an ideal way to escape: both to the country and upon return to ones home; as back home one is no longer required to face the challenges they have witnessed in these other countries.

Upon returning from volunteer projects, although some volunteers educate their communities, others find it easy to slip back into their old habits of their comparatively luxurious lifestyles. As Maura, a twenty-four old volunteer from California observed, “there was reverse culture shock for a week, but then I adjusted and was back to my old self. It was like it was a dream, and never really happened. Which...which...was honestly almost easier, since there was so much pain that I saw there.”⁵⁴ Building off of Maura’s comment, perhaps the popularity in volunteering abroad is more than simply for the thrill, but rather provides mutual escape and a way to distance oneself. Therefore distancing yourself from further assistance. Thus international assistance could be easier for people, rather than in ones home community, where if you begin to help, how do you justify discontinuing help, unless you fly home on a plane? Ultimately, Maura’s statement helps us understand a particular complication in voluntourism through its current development path.

The past twenty-plus year rise in popularity for voluntourism, that followed McMillon’s book, has been characterized (in the tourism industry) by almost a thousand new volunteer organizations. Some of these organizations have been grossing millions of dollars as their growth has continued. Included in these multi-million dollar volunteer organizations are several more reputable and leading brand names, such as Projects Abroad and Cross-Cultural Solutions. One in particular, Projects Abroad, founded in 1992, has become one of the leading volunteer abroad

organizations.⁵⁵ Although, Cross-Cultural Solutions, founded in 1994, has a similar background, mission and profit in comparison to Projects Abroad, all ethnographic research was through Projects Abroad, and for the purposes of this body of work, we will be using Projects Abroad as a lens into this fantastical world of international volunteer tourism.

Projects Abroad is one of the original, ‘mainstream’ volunteer organizations that is categorized in the multi-million dollar region. It is also one of the oldest, most well-established organizations to date. The story of Projects Abroad goes like this: In 1992, a few college students desired a pause from their academics, a ‘gap year,’ although the term was not yet common. The students went to their geography professor, Dr. Peter Slowe, with a desire of traveling and working in Eastern Europe. Slowe researched, but could not find much in the way of travel combined with work experience, so instead he arranged for his students to travel to Romania where he knew some fellow professors and allowed them to teach English. This was the beginning of Projects Abroad.⁵⁶ During the first five years, Projects Abroad was small, with just two staff organizing projects for university students to teach English in Eastern Europe. However, with more people taking time off from academics and work-related breaks as well, in addition to many developing countries in need of self-funded volunteers, Projects Abroad began to grow in popularity and reach across the globe.

Today, Projects Abroad volunteers may still teach English in Eastern Europe or elsewhere, but indeed there are many more opportunities as well. As of March of 2013, Projects Abroad provides programs in twenty-eight countries, sometimes with several different bases within one country. In addition to teaching English, there are eleven additional volunteer or ‘internship’⁵⁷ opportunities. This does not include Projects Abroad’s comprehensive gap year program for high school graduates (costing upward of \$30,000) or the structured two-week high

school specials for current high school students. With approximately 10,000 volunteers annually, all paying thousands of dollars, and having dozens of choices to choose from, it is no surprise why Projects Abroad has become such a successful business. According to the Projects Abroad website, they are “*the world’s leading international volunteer organization,*” and have worked with over 50,000 volunteers to date in their first twenty years of service.⁵⁸

From beginning threads of tourism to a switch of focus to programs like VSO to Peace Corps to Earthwatch and then to Projects Abroad and other such solidified volunteer organizations, tourism has certainly seen a shift in focus. Now, with a comprehension of where volunteer tourism has developed from, both out of tourism and through beginning desires of altruistic behavior embedded in a desire to travel, we can further unpack the challenges within this industry.

Competing Discourses on the Current Concerns of Voluntourism

The new social awareness of issues globally, beginning with World War I and continuing through the Vietnam war, as well as other social issues such as the movements toward civil rights, women’s rights, worker strikes and so on, have made our world more aware, (to an extent) of the issues that plague our globe today. The combination of this awareness, paired with the Peace Corps, a plethora of non-governmental organizations popping up each day, and volunteer service organizations such as Projects Abroad has led to an elite service world that is being complicated each day.

Where Projects Abroad and other similar organizations, such as Cross-Cultural Solutions or International Volunteer Headquarters, have declared that their mission is to provide cross-cultural experiences that help aid in making a difference in the world, sometimes the effect of

their programs has come across differently. Power dynamics, skill levels, and hedonistic motivations, as well as several other aspects under these umbrellas can complicate the effects that come across differently. Namely, while the intent behind voluntourism may be altruistic in part, the consumer aspect complicates the industry further declaring a need for investigation into this institution.

As a fairly new, but highly popular new phenomenon, the level of research and analytical work done on voluntourism is minimal, and rarely holistic. One of the highly problematic aspects of studies thus far on voluntourism is that there is very little research on host communities, and the focus is instead geared toward understanding, critiquing or praising the volunteer.⁵⁹ This comprehensive study hopes to unpack, through Projects Abroad in Ghana as its lens, the complexities of the various participants involved through ethnographic study geared at a fuller understanding of the industry of voluntourism. The industry, as we have seen is complex and erupts from both social consciousness, 'philanthropic' motives and tourism. Tourism, which can be seen as a selfish, voyeuristic industry in inextricably connected to the volunteering of these projects. Due to this compact trip of both tourism and volunteering, the fine balance between altruism, selfishness and tensions may arise as a result. The shift of tourism being purely self-motivated to somewhat focused on benevolence is important in understanding the development of the broader tourism industry.

Before digging deeper into possible ethical challenges, we must first understand what discourse there is on volunteer tourism already, as well as what the literature covers and does not cover. Ultimately, understanding whether or not voluntourism is 'good' or 'bad' defeats the holistic purpose of an ethnographically based body of work. However, the current literature thus far, arguing for and against the complex industry that is steadily growing, does aid in a more

holistic understanding of these service-oriented vacations. As anthropology is geared toward understanding, hopefully in an emic form, comprehending the experiences reported thus far and in what tone is important to framing the theory behind this body of work. What are people saying about voluntourism today? Who is saying what? Where can we dive further into these dialogues to unpack further complexities?

One of the issues that arises in voluntourism is that scholars, writers and volunteers themselves occasionally disagree on what voluntourism is accomplishing or even is. Voluntourism can be seen as “discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need,”⁶⁰ or elite community service projects designed to create “bountiful resumes”⁶¹ that supposedly show philanthropic motives but ultimately is for the self. Indeed, there are many other definitions as well, this is merely a sampling. While some definitions seem to point to the ethical issues, such as elucidating motives of resume boosting, others tend to focus on the ‘doing good’ aspect and helping those in need. These loaded terms within these definitions can assist in clarifying conflicting opinions on the industry. Other definitions comment on the fact that voluntourism “almost always involves a group of idealistic and privileged travelers who have vastly different socio-economic statuses vis-à-vis those they serve,”⁶² which alludes to some of the difficulties that may arise in power dynamics, and is yet another lens with which to analyze volunteer tourism. While definitions do not explore the extent of differing opinions on voluntourism it does show that some literature focuses on intents of altruistic behavior, while others sources challenge motivations and other complications that voluntourism encompasses. What is voluntourism for and what does it do?

Literature on voluntourism ranges from journals of sustainable tourism, to social justice and development articles, to ethical journals, to development blogs, to neo-colonial arguments

and beyond. The literature, although varied, shows very little on behalf of the experience of host communities. Almost all literature is focused on the server rather than the served.⁶³ Some literature is critical, others are empirically based, some are simply a documentation of an experience, and some are arguments for or against. Ultimately, for the academic papers, the audience is for other academics. However, the blogs and news articles are geared more toward those interested in various quandaries in the growing phenomena. In addition to literature based on theory, fact and data, there are some studies that record participants' responses. In regard to ethnographic studies that focus more on the experience, people's documented opinions in specific articles tend to be more one-sided, either from the locals, volunteers, or observers. I have yet to find a holistic combination of all participants (though it does not mean it does not exist).

In all of my interviews I asked my informants what they thought of voluntourism, how it could help and how it could harm. The responses I received varied, which elucidates further differing opinions, even within a small sample size. These competing and converging narratives about the benefits and harm in voluntourism are critical to understanding how voluntourism is seen, understood and discussed in society today.

Christian, a thirty-one year old Ghanaian who works for Projects Abroad and has for over ten years, asserted that, "voluntourism has both helped and hurt [this] country. It provides economic gains to our society and an increase in cross-cultural communication, which is important - but it also brings entitled rich young people convinced they can 'save Africa,' and therefore [they] can sometimes do more harm than good."⁶⁴ Namely, for Christian, though he could see the positive aspects of increased cross-cultural communication, he also appeared frustrated by a sense of entitlement on behalf of the volunteers. Christian's personal opinion is backed up by several articles, in which critics have argued that voluntourism can be harmful in

the power structures that it creates when volunteers “enter host communities without an understanding” of how to help in sustainable and sensitive ways.⁶⁵ Additionally, as volunteers could be seen as both somewhat altruistic in wanting to help, yet imperialist in wanting to ‘save Africa,’ as Christian claims, the outcome can be complicated. As Benjamin Lough, an assistant professor of social work who studies international service, claims, the motivations to volunteer will “affect international volunteer service outcomes.”⁶⁶ Lough and others who co-authored his article, argue that these outcomes can be affected in a negative or positive form depending on a variety of factors, including motivations, understandings and attitudes.⁶⁷ Ultimately, these studies on voluntourism and Christian’s experience are critical in illuminating potential concerns regarding motives, altruism, and the possibility of doing more harm than good, if not cautious.

Another informant, Mercy, a thirty-four year old Ghanaian woman who works as a teacher and supervises Projects Abroad volunteers on their teaching placements, has a different concern. Mercy feels as though “sometimes this voluntourism as you call it, can hurt the children because they become attached and then poof the white people disappear.”⁶⁸ Different from Christian’s opinion about voluntourism potentially being harmful for entitlement and power dynamics, Mercy believes it has more to do with the lack of continuity in the children’s lives that volunteers work with. Mercy is not the only who has this concern. In fact many critics have cited the short-term aspect and lack of continuity in projects as a potential concern, both in terms of dependence, job loss for locals, and abandonment for children.⁶⁹ British journalist Ian Birrell reports that “abused or abandoned children form emotional attachments to the visitors, who [then] increase their trauma by disappearing back home.”⁷⁰ Which ultimately, is exactly what Mercy seems to be concerned about. Additionally, Costas Christ backs up this assertion by explaining that one of the concerns of volunteerism is that there is “no formal regulations to

protect children from potential harm, including the psychological impact of repeated emotional attachments and abandonments from waves of volunteers.”⁷¹ Although not all projects include children, several studies corroborate that education and work with children is upwards of eighty-five percent of volunteer service projects abroad,⁷² thus increasing the importance of both Birrell, Christ and Mercy’s concerns regarding volunteer tourism and continuity.

On a more positive note, Emmanuel, a forty-five-year-old, Ghanaian Projects Abroad staff member believes that “voluntourism provides us insight on other cultures and volunteers a true understanding of ours.”⁷³ Emmanuel’s opinion of voluntourism, throughout his entire interview was extremely positive, more so even than any of the volunteers I interviewed. He truly believed in the positive aspects of this cultural exchange relationship set up by Projects Abroad and voluntourism as a whole. Additionally, Susie, the certified teacher and volunteer from Canada whom was mentioned earlier, stated that volunteer tourism allowed her, “a form of cultural comprehension of a culture previously unknown.” Both Emmanuel and Susie’s opinions of the industry do reflect the mission statements of many of these volunteer organizations that tend to claim cross-cultural understanding as one of their main motivators toward volunteering abroad. Yet, neither of these responses discuss whether or not volunteers are truly aiding Ghana, which is usually the primary stated mission.

Building upon Emmanuel and Susie’s more positive opinions relating to cross-cultural communication, some supporters of volunteer tourism see an importance in giving back to society through volunteering and traveling.⁷⁴ Ken Budd, author of “The Voluntourist” chronicles his world travels and discusses the critical nature of social change through volunteering abroad.⁷⁵ Katy Farber, a teacher and author, echoes Budd’s sentiments about the benefits of service learning for both volunteers and host communities, arguing that it builds “global citizenry,”⁷⁶ and

is important to assist countries ‘in need,’ though she does not describe how to identify need. However, despite Farber not defining need, as Projects Abroad writes, “through your chosen voluntourism project, you will not only provide needed aid and services to your community, you will also gain new insight from your cross-cultural immersion.”⁷⁷ The presumed need is then created via the media. This example not only reiterates Emmanuel and Susie’s belief, but further suggests that the volunteer work is in fact useful, or ‘needed’ aid and that one gains a cross-cultural experience (that is perhaps beneficial for being global citizen). Though again, while a cross-cultural experiences have been qualitatively recorded as a positive benefit, the actual aid work completed is lacking in data, making it difficult to evaluate this industry in terms of outcomes.

Stephen Wearing, in his book “Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that Make a Difference” adds to this discussion of positive benefits by explaining that volunteers grow as individuals, strengthen self-identity and can bring their experiences back to privileged communities and help spread knowledge about different cultures; which is ultimately beneficial for the spreading of knowledge.⁷⁸ Although cautious in his articulation of positive effects of voluntourism, Wearing focuses on the “potential positive social and environmental benefits of volunteer tourism” while also understanding and articulating the necessary “prerequisites for a successful experience.”⁷⁹ Namely, to Wearing one aspect that is crucial to benefitting communities is understanding boundaries of this industry, what you are signing up for, what you can bring, the dynamics, the history, and what you can and cannot do and accomplish.⁸⁰ Specifically, Wearing explores the potential for social consciousness invigorating participants to enact social change once returned from projects, which he argues is a positive social benefit of voluntourism.⁸¹ Arguments over the positive social benefits do provide a lens with which to analyze this industry in a more positive

light than most opinionated articles tend to be, however, it also is on the basis of strong relationships with locals being built, which is not always the case.

To exemplify let us look at the contrast between Projects Abroad media and a critic of these programs to this effect. Projects Abroad promotes their justification by adding that a voluntourist creates strong relationships with locals that increase ones understanding of the world. Under this logic, these strong relationships bring ties to the local community and promote positive social benefits of cross-cultural understanding and long-lasting friendships, just as Budd, Farber and Wearing are arguing. Sounds like a positive aspect right? Well, in contrast, Osub Mohamud, a Somali writer (born and raised in the United States) discerns that due to unequal power dynamics caused by privilege and socioeconomic status differences, these relationships are almost always “condescending and superficial relationships.”⁸² Mohamud goes on to explain that these relationships rarely succeed in being real, open relationships, but are rather based on perpetual inequalities within the system of the voluntourist industry. Mohamud’s articulation is important in looking at a balance between what some supporters are saying and what some are experiencing on the ground. Her articulation suggests a need for a further look at relationships on the ground. Where idealistic in nature, Budd, Farber, Wearing and volunteer organizations missions statements, that claim a necessity to serve abroad, may be creating more issues than they mean to, despite a seeming intent rooted in a desire to help.

To elaborate further on concerns, Costas Christ, a writer for the National Geographic Traveler magazine, complicates these arguments and claims that this ‘giving back’ mentality in action presents not only a dependency on outside assistance that is not always sustainable, but occasionally is *undesired* assistance, primarily from a lack of knowledge of how to do what is actually needed.⁸³ Many sources support Christ’s articulation in reiterating that volunteers are

often unskilled, not qualified and, if anything, could be taking jobs from locals who need the financial security much more than they do.⁸⁴ Saliently, though perhaps pure in purpose, even in the ‘giving back’ actions and mindset there are concerns. Furthermore, building off concerns of said ‘giving back’ conundrum, as outlined by Christ, Brendan Rigby, a writer for an online development blog, points out that these services rarely accomplish what they were meant to achieve, therefore negating the aspect of truly helping those in need.⁸⁵

Whether one supports, critics or is somewhere in between on their opinion of voluntourism, it is clear there is a diverse discourse on the subject thus far. Furthermore, the need to discuss these varying views and ask key questions is necessary in order to fully analyze the effectiveness of the voluntourism industry. This business is making a profit, but is it harming communities in the process? Are the positive benefits worth the potential harm? Some argue that the negatives outweigh the positives, or even that volunteers are doing nothing for host communities. Yet, in contrast to these various concerns, critiques and ethical questions, in my interviews I found that those currently experiencing volunteer tourism on the ground occasionally disagree regarding these criticisms.

“We are gaining something!” demands Emmanuel, seemingly disturbed by my questions about ethical challenges in Projects Abroad and other such programs. Emmanuel sighs and leans back in his chair. He waves his finger at me and then says:

Listen Akua,⁸⁶ We do not just gain economically or from volunteers bringing insight home. Ghanaian schools get lessons from native English speakers that helps improve their knowledge of the language that helps them advance in our society. Hospitals get helping hands to assist in jobs that other people are too busy to do. Orphanages get people who give them love and attention that our regular staff do not always have the luxury of being able to do. Ghana does benefit. Yes, yes problems I see. I see the problems. But we do have goodness from volunteers, even if they don’t help in the way they think they help, it helps us.⁸⁷

From Emmanuel's response, it is apparent that there are several different forms in which volunteers can benefit host communities, yet this support is complicated in itself. Emmanuel's first example of native English speakers working in schools, alludes to the cultural capital of using a popular and globalized language. Where English is the national language of Ghana, which is part of why it is a popular destination for volunteers in Africa, this national language developed as a result of being colonized by the British. Ultimately, though Emmanuel may not see it, his example points to a reinforcement of hegemonic structures of western culture in which English raises cultural and social capital. On a similar thread, in a report of development and volunteers in Ghana, completed in a dissertation by Thomas Roberts, he quoted an analysis that stated, "for some [contact with Western staff or volunteers] it is an empowering process that may ultimately bring real benefits for the communities they serve. But for many, it would seem that overseas contact encourages the transfer of Western codes and fashions, reinforcing western cultural imperialism."⁸⁸ Saliently, although Emmanuel did not make the connection to cultural imperialism, this quote in Roberts's dissertation elucidates a connection between both the real benefits of volunteer tourism, as well as the complications. As we move on, this idea of cultural imperialism will be important to consider in unpacking the harm and good that can be done through this industry.

Additionally, Emmanuel's closing line, "even if they don't help in the way they think they help, it helps us," suggest a necessity for introspection toward the effect of voluntourism on host communities, which thus far has been significantly lacking. Although not many others reiterated his statement, in asking Emmanuel to elaborate, he mentioned that volunteers helped Ghanaians experience a new culture when they (Ghanaians) did not have the funds to travel themselves. He also added that volunteers may think they help by working in a hospital, but what

might help most is the plantain chips they buy outside the hospital. Clearly, Emmanuel's articulation illustrates some crucial aspects of the volunteer tourism industry, both in concerns and positive attributes.

On a personal level, Emmanuel's words strike a cord with me. Not only was it my personal desire to do something worthwhile in this chaotic world I chose to enter in 2009 through my own trip with Projects Abroad, but his comment made me realize there are always two sides. Yes, the criticisms and problems with voluntourism are real and need to be discussed. However, this does not mean there are no tangible positive effects on both sides, for the volunteer and for the host countries involved. In a comprehensive analysis of international service volunteering, done by three social development scholars, they spoke to this dialect between benefits and tensions by writing that:

Constructive interaction among people from different countries and cultures may increase intercultural knowledge and skills, and may lead to increased tolerance - that could contribute to community efforts to reduce cultural tensions - unfortunately poorly run programs and lack of supervision could result in animosity and tension that casts a shadow on an entire program.⁸⁹

Ultimately, though this quote is rich with areas to analyze, overall it points to an agreement that there is no simple answer to the rights and wrongs or benefits and harm within this complex industry of volunteer service projects abroad. How can we categorize benefit and harm within this industry? Is voluntourism doing more harm than good? It is time to take these questions further.

As we have seen, over the past twenty years voluntourism has erupted in a form that essentially replaces the empty vacations that used to exist. A fun vacation can now include volunteer work, whether in bite-sized pieces or in long-term placements. Alternative tourism has taken over, and leisure may now be a way of the past, at least for the majority. Research thus far has not kept pace with the growth of international volunteer service as an "emergent international

institution.”⁹⁰ With this booming business, it is crucial that we analyze not only the history of how it came to be – but how it is today on the ground. Understanding the history of volunteer tourism and its preliminary impact and responses is only the beginning of how to address this larger growing business. Now, we must probe deeper into the concerns, both ethical and anthropological, that have developed as a result of the thousands of people paying to volunteer in different locales around the world each year.

Chapter 2

The Consumer: Motives, Entitlements and Attitudes of the Volunteer

“If I knew someone was coming over with the expressed intention of doing good, I would flee”
- Henry David Thoreau⁹¹

More Harm or More Good?: How to Judge

I could see the look of concern pass over my supervisor Faith’s face as she read the form, then handed it to me. I stared at the piece of paper I had in front of me, my fingers shaking: blood type O-, Urinary tract infection, No STI’s, HB levels in range, and at the bottom a small HIV-positive was written with a circle around it.

Faith spoke quietly, “Jessye, you need to be the one to tell the patient the results.” Faith nodded in the direction of the soon-to-be mother who sat across from me. My stomach turned and my forehead was burning. I was hyper-aware of my surroundings. I could hear the other nurses outside our office. The smell of fresh mandazi reached my nostrils and I could see patients walking into the clinic. I looked at this young woman, Elizabeth, who was no more than nineteen and forced myself to spit the words out. As I told her of her positive HIV status, and

explained that she could still survive, I watched what looked like despair, fear, and confusion spread across her face. Tears instantly fell. My own body was shaking. I felt distinctly out of place. I became almost ill, and my supervisor had to comfort me.

The day after I had to tell Elizabeth of her status, reeling from the experience, I proposed the idea of an HIV-positive support group to the doctors at the Kenyan medical clinic where I worked. Receiving an affirmative response regarding the idea of a support group, I set the plan in motion with the help of another intern, Anna. I wanted to take my experience with Elizabeth and create a community that could support other people who were facing issues of stigmatization, poverty, abuse and pain. Anna and I took action; we put flyers around town and called patients of the clinic who were HIV-positive. Within a week, our free HIV-positive support group was up and running. I would speak in English and my supervisor would translate into Kiswahili so that discussions were held in Kiswahili in order to increase participation and comfort. I ran the meetings similarly to a group-therapy model, geared toward fostering support. To relieve stress and cultivate friendships between group members, we played a game of volleyball. Laughter and smiles filled the courtyard and at the time I was very pleased with the results.

Overall, on the outside, this support group seemed a success. Yet, my place as a foreigner requires further analysis and criticism. While clearly desiring to take my experience with Elizabeth and transform it into something tangible and positive, the effects of creating an HIV-positive support group as a voluntourist are complicated. Though the group did continue for over a year after my departure, (I received email updates from a Kenyan woman who took over the group when I left) there were several problems with its creation in the first place. First of all, as a volunteer, an outsider, what right or authority did I have in creating such a group? Though my intent was to help, I could have done more harm. I was in a position of power where people

listened to me because I was a guest, was white and held knowledge of western culture that was idealized by locals in many ways (primarily in being a white savior with wealth). Yet, by reinforcing western norms, such as support groups, I was using my power to preach what I believed was best for the Kenyans I was working with, a notion which could definitely do harm to both their culture and tensions between foreigners and locals. Additionally, after beginning the group, patients continuously asked me for money. The help they needed more than a support group was most likely financial, but that was not what I was able or willing to give. Yet, they knew I had money, in order to be there, and I could have potentially been reinforcing stereotypes of greedy, rich, whites not giving money to the needy and thus further jeopardizing mutual understanding. Though on the outside an HIV-positive support group sounds nice, it was not without concerns. Where some could argue I created positive social change, others would argue it was not my place to do so, and that I could have or did harm the community. Though this example happens to be outside of Ghana, it still holds the same relevance in terms of an ability for volunteers to harm communities, even if intents are to do good.

Volunteers are in a unique position to both potentially do good, but potentially create harm. It is not automatically negative, but not understanding the concerns or potential to harm host communities could be incredibly detrimental for them and the future of this industry. As Milton Friedman has observed, (as quoted by anthropologist, William Fisher) “the power to do good is also the power to do harm,” a process that is all the more difficult to sort out when “what one man regards as good, another may regard as harm.”⁹² Now, while many may support my HIV-positive support group, or the supposed ‘good’ of many other volunteer initiatives, others may regard it as harmful. Neither view would be more right or more wrong. The politics of

voluntourism are complex and where one may believe they are justified in his or her 'good' to be done, another may see it as oppressive.

As Ian Birrell, a British journalist suggests, "too many travelers carry a naively romantic idea about doing good alongside their luggage" adding that, "the rapid growth of 'voluntourism' is like the rapid growth of the aid industry: slaving our own consciences without fully examining the consequences for the people we seek to help. All too often, our heartfelt efforts to help only make matters worse."⁹³ Namely, as the title of his article suggests, before one pays to volunteer, perhaps they should think of the harm they could do beforehand. The combination between little to no continuity for projects, a lack of qualifications for the workplace, and little to no help actually provided, tend to be the largest complaints that critics have of the voluntourism industry. Building upon these concerns of continuity, qualifications and actual 'good' done, I would like to critically examine the volunteer's intents and attitudes.

As we continue to unpack these notions of potential negative impacts on host communities, it is important to frame this chapter with relation to the theories that will allow us to analyze this data. In chapter one, I asked essentially: how can we tell if voluntourism is doing more harm than good? And are the positive benefits of voluntourism worth the potential, or inevitable, harm? In this chapter, I aim to begin to discuss potential answers to these questions through understanding a key player in this complex field: the consumer - the volunteer. Due to paying to volunteer, there is a distinct relationship between the volunteer and the host communities that complicates notions of altruism embedded in the discourse. The consumer is the volunteer and the consumed is the host community. In understanding both the consumer, consumed relationship, as well as discussing whether volunteers are doing more harm or more good it will be important to utilize a distinct framework.

Now, those who can afford to volunteer abroad are motivated to do so for a variety of reasons: some more altruistic, some more self-motivated. Once within their placement, how they interact with locals and within their placements can negatively or positively impact their host communities. The consumer, the volunteer, may have an ambiguous understanding of their role and privileges, which can lead to incredible tensions. Namely, the motivations prior and attitudes (and actions) during volunteer placements are crucial to understanding the impact on hosts. Particularly with the potential for the impact to be ethically and anthropologically concerning. With this foundation of volunteer attributes, there are three key ethical theories I aim to unpack in this chapter.

The first, regards debating the possibility of altruism, in relation to stated ‘altruistic’ motivations of the volunteers who choose to volunteer abroad. Yet these volunteer claims are complicated by perhaps self-motivated interests, which may destruct hopes of true altruism, not to mention the volunteer intersection with tourism, in theory a selfish industry. According to philosopher Thomas Nagel, pure altruism *can* exist when “it is the direct influence of one person’s interest on the actions of another, simply because in itself the interest of the former provides the latter with a reason to act.”⁹⁴ Using this understanding of altruism to mean that it must be purely in the interest of the other, we will frame an understanding of volunteer motives and actions. Throughout this chapter there will be a discuss of possibility of altruism or potential for using a façade of such.

Building upon the idea of a façade of altruism, the second theory we will be attempting to map onto volunteer and host community responses is whether or not we judge on the *intent* of the action or the *outcome* of the action. In specific regard to intent versus outcome with direct relation to humanitarian or altruistic causes, scholar Alex Bellamy argues that, "it is where the

humanitarian intent is secondary, where it is a background motive and not an immediate intention, and where it is a fortuitous by-product that the likelihood of means undermining ends is greatest."⁹⁵ Namely, Bellamy is saying that when intent is not toward humanitarian goals primarily, the potential for effects of such may decrease or be undermined by other motives, thus furthering ethical concern.

In an additional ethical view, Ronald Buckley and Danielle Beu concur that “the consequences experienced by all individuals affected by the exchange determines the ethicality of the behavior.”⁹⁶ This theory is slightly varying from Bellamy’s in that it focuses primarily on the outcome being the ethical determinant, rather than the intent and motivation. In moving forward through this chapter, and using these ideas to understand volunteer motives and actions, it will be important to understand the ethical focus on both sides, as both have salience in these discussions. Volunteers, as we will see, sometimes embody attitudes they feel are right, but can harm communities. If their intent was pure, does the outcome matter? Ultimately, there is a relationship here to utilitarianism, under volunteer tourism, and it will be important to understand in comprehending intents and actions, especially when intertwined under the name of altruism, but could be in fact hedonistic.

Lastly, in incorporating the consumer phenomenon back into these two theories, and matching the consumer nature with motives and attitudes, it will be important to look at ethical quandaries of the consumer’s rights. For voluntourism, humanitarian intents and outcomes and any hope of altruism are intrinsically confused within this voluntourism industry, due to the connection of tourism and consumerism. In a generally American, but often westernized view as well, there tends to be an social agreement that the ‘customer is always right.’ Yet, in applying this theory toward pay-to-volunteer service projects the customer could cause a negative impact

if they practice what they may believe are their consumer rights. Relationships between consumer and the consumed are often tense, and complicated by the aspect of humanitarian claims. What may be particularly useful here is an understanding of Marcel Mauss' infamous 'spirit of the gift' theory that essentially claims that for every gift there is an expectation in return.⁹⁷ Where Mauss' article does not entirely neatly map onto this phenomenon, the claim of volunteers 'giving' while also expecting 'something' in return, could help shed a relation to his claims. Using both Mauss' 'spirit of the gift' theory, as well as some anthropological literature on consumerism complications, I aim to unpack the ways in which the consumer aspect can cause potential harm within this voluntourism industry. However, at the same time, within this consumer narrative, the economic benefit to host communities is usually objectively the largest benefit volunteers contribute toward those they are serving.

Namely, using the framework of theory on altruism, motives versus outcomes, and complications of potentially consumer expectations of the volunteer, I hope to offer potential concerns within the volunteer tourism industry. In addition to theory, I will weave ethnographic responses that will illuminate the reality of the experiences on the ground on behalf of both the consumer and consumed.

Narratives and Perceptions of Self-Interested Motives

Erin sat across from me drinking local rum at an outdoor spot bar, the sound of Ghanaian hiplife music in the background made it difficult to conduct my interview. I had specifically requested to interview her because I had heard rumor that she had a volatile relationship with her work. She asked that we meet in a local spot bar near her host family's house.

“I’m just here to have fun, travel and relax,” Erin laughs, sipping her strong drink, “I may have thought I could help stuff in the beginning, but then I realized I did not like how [they] did stuff here and just sort of gave up on being a beneficial volunteer. I’m leaving soon and I can’t really help in the hospitals anyways. Plus, I’d rather hang out with the volunteers than the locals. I’m doing this for me, but I’m okay with that.”⁹⁸

Erin shrugged and continued to drink. Erin, a twenty-one-year-old medical volunteer from France, did not seem to arrive upon the same pretenses that volunteer programs claim. Her quote does not show a strong intent to help, nor a desire or attempt at even cross-cultural understanding. Though perhaps not a majority opinion, Erin’s flippant response is a jumping point for concerns in motives and actions within these programs.

Most volunteers whom I interviewed admitted that, at least in part, they were doing this for themselves primarily. Yet, do self-motivations harm potential for a positive impact on communities? As Ossub Mohamud, a Somali, US born, writer says of her experience volunteering in Asia, “what had I really done besides inflate my ego and boost my resume?”⁹⁹ For Mohamud, what she found was that although her intentions may have been noble, ultimately she was not qualified, was only at her placement for a few weeks and the walls she painted were already starting to rust by the time she left. Potentially, a resume boost and ego inflation may be a primary motive in these projects. Where does that leave potential for humanitarian causes? As previously articulated, philosopher Bellamy believes that if humanitarian intent is not primary, the potential for harm will exist to a further extent. Bellamy adds later that, “the focus on intentions is crucial because it is the intent of the intervener, not the ostensible humanitarian outcome that may be produced.”¹⁰⁰ Saliently, in relation to volunteer tourism, the intent of the volunteer may be in need of more analysis for it can shade how the outcome is produced.

While Erin alludes that she may have intended to ‘help’ in the beginning, quickly her time became shadowed by a desire for leisure and pleasure for herself. Where not inherently problematic, and considering that most volunteers are unqualified to be performing the tasks they may desire to, it still does pose concern. If not on these projects to help, then volunteers could in fact be placing a strain on host communities in them taking time to train volunteers, taking away from their time and from job creation for locals.¹⁰¹ Where Christ argues that the “good news in all of this...is the existence of a vast pool of travelers who also want to give back when they hit the road,”¹⁰² the ‘bad’ news is that this creates a dynamic in the volunteer industry where volunteers could be seen simply as a way for economic gain rather than for actually assisting. Erin was definitely contributing to her host community through purchasing drinks and traveling across the country, yet her relationship to her placement and lack of desire for humanitarian causes could pose problems.

With over one million Americans traveling overseas to volunteer abroad in 2008 and more than fifty-five million Americans having participated in some form of volunteer vacation thus far, this is clearly a popular industry.¹⁰³ Yet, the question is why? What motivates volunteers to want to volunteer abroad, and furthermore how does their presence once they have arrived effect the relationships volunteers have with host countries?

Referencing back to the comprehensive study done on international volunteer service, Lough, Sherradon and McBride offer that the motivations for youth, ages sixteen to twenty-five, (which are the *vast* majority of volunteers, close to ninety percent) tend to volunteer internationally to “gain a broader perspective on the world, to contribute to society and help others, have an adventure, take a break from school or work, meet people and have fun, acquire skills, enhance a resume or get a job.”¹⁰⁴ Yet, they additionally conclude that if the intent is more

toward personal benefit there will likely be less to offer host communities and could potentially negatively impact communities and relationships between volunteers and locals.¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, before deciding to volunteer abroad, there is a thought process, a motivation behind ones decision. In my interviews with volunteers, I asked each informant why they chose to volunteer.

“I wanted to boost my CV [resume] and do something I felt good about. Instead of just a lazy vacation, I wanted one where I got to feel good about stuff I was doing,”¹⁰⁶ offers Mike, a twenty-two-year-old volunteer from Ireland. Like Erin’s comment regarding an aspect of self-motivation, Mike’s desire to volunteer abroad seemed to stem primarily from self-interest. Even in Mike’s desire to do good, based on his words it seems rooted in a desire for personal recognition of ‘doing good’ rather than a focus on actually completing the ‘good.’

While certainly not the only motivation, Mike’s comment did resemble many of the interviews I conducted with volunteers. Is volunteering abroad only rooted in what Mohamud suggests and Mike reiterates: a resume and ego boost? Is a potentially selfish motivation problematic? As the research suggests, the selfish motivations have shown to have a negative impact on communities. Lough and others offer that volunteer service may be more effective when “they have fewer expectations for personal gain and greater local accountability.”¹⁰⁷ However, in only one of my interviews did I feel as though the primary expectation was to help, rather than the primary motive being for personal gain. Namely, based on these responses, it seems that both Erin and Mike seem to have much larger expectations for personal gain, which then may interfere with potential for them to feel accountable for their actions within host communities.

Mary, an eighteen-year old from Texas on a teaching placement, smacks her gum loudly as she talks casually about her motivations to volunteer abroad, “my friend did it on her gap year

and I had seen some advertisements for it. It seemed like the fun, cool thing to do. Who doesn't want to travel and learn about new things? Besides, I knew it would look good later,"¹⁰⁸ Mary's motivation seems to incorporate both Erin's desire for travel and Mike's motivation toward a resume boost. It is important to note that neither of these responses incorporate a strong narrative of altruism or desire for humanitarian. Where media may popularize these projects and sell humanitarian acts in a tourist form, rarely did volunteers express to me that their primary goal was to help and some never really mentioned it all. These narratives thus far reflect a paradox between the literature promoting volunteer tourism aiming to provide development and aid work, versus where motivations may be rooted. Where the media may promote assisting these communities, the motivations seem to be mostly geared around a 'feel good vacation' that can be bragged about later on. Dissecting these motivations is crucial for it does hold some ethical questions: is there a right or wrong reason to volunteer? How do perceptions of motives on behalf of hosts intercept potential for benefits to host communities and cross-cultural understanding?

Where perhaps self-motivated intent is not inherently wrong, volunteer motivations are perceived or understood by host communities. These perceptions can further complicate the volunteer industry and relations between volunteer and host. Just as I asked each volunteer what motivated them to volunteer, in my interviews with site supervisors and Projects Abroad staff, I asked each informant why they believed volunteers chose to volunteer. Curious not only about declared motivations of the volunteers, I was interested in perceptions of those affected by the volunteer's presence, namely supervisors and staff. Not only were the responses I got varied, but the perceptions of why volunteers chose to volunteer usually did not match the claims of the volunteer's self-reported motivations. This overlap of competing narratives is precisely the

reason for ethnographic studies in the first place, for it provides us with an understanding of how those involved in this industry are perceiving motivations.

“They do it for them. I see it all the time. They travel for long weekends. Only coming to work when it is convenient for them or they have nothing better to do. This is a just a vacation for their resume,”¹⁰⁹ argued May, a Ghanaian student studying to be lawyer, who supervises volunteers on their Human Rights placements. Though May happens to have had a more negative experience with volunteers than most, her perception that volunteers are simply doing this for themselves is critical to understanding the ethical challenges of this industry. Whether or not May is correct in her understandings of the volunteers’ motivations, the fact that locals are experiencing volunteers in this way is problematic. Though volunteers are most likely not informed by anthropology, even in development literature and utilitarianism theory there is a focus on minimizing negative impacts. As ethical philosophers, J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams assert that “minimization of misery is our sole ultimate ethical principle,”¹¹⁰ particularly in understanding the relationship between intent and outcome. While volunteers with self-motivated interests that are observed or perceived by host communities are not necessarily creating misery, May’s view does allude to tensions within this construction of a business with ethical concerns. Other site supervisors, and even Projects Abroad staff, overwhelmingly echoed May’s sentiments that volunteers engaged in these projects for themselves. Due to these perceptions, even if volunteers *are* engaging in projects for other motivations, the tensions between staff and volunteers are strained through these perceptions. Unfortunately, this then causes concern for the industry with stressed relationships that then may not allow for benefits to either side due to the potential of hostility, misunderstandings and alienating actions.

Assumptions, Ethics of Need and the Possibility of Semi-Altruism

The ethics of assistance, according to scholar Deen Chatterjee, have offered a theoretical claim that it is “both the political responsibility of governments of affluent countries to relieve poverty abroad and the personal responsibility of individuals to assist the distant needy.”¹¹¹ Namely, embedded in the ethics of helping, in addition to governmental assistance, there appears to be a focus on an individual obligation to help the ‘distant needy.’ This idea of the neediness of the ‘other’ has become a piece of the voluntourism industry in both literature claiming a need for volunteers and in social awareness of issues that promotes serving others as a ideal to hope to accomplish. However, due to gray lines in motivations, the tourism aspect, and unqualified volunteers, the ethics of this assistance could potentially fall short of being effective in any form. As discussed in chapter one, some supervisors perceive volunteers as desiring to “save Africa,”¹¹² without realizing what little they can do with the lack of skills and time they have to offer. These perspectives matter and are often missing in the literature regarding volunteer tourism. How host communities are perceiving volunteers affects potential harm and benefit.

Though Projects Abroad will warn volunteers that they are not saving the world, they do not explain that Ghanaian’s or potentially other supervisors, will perceive volunteers as desiring to do so. There is little dialogue on cautioning volunteers toward their motivations. As so many volunteers come in unaware of Ghana’s relative development compared to what the media portrays of Africa, many are surprised by how little they, the volunteers, are actually *needed*. In example, one volunteer Lina, a twenty-two-year-old volunteer from Colorado on an orphanage care project, explained that she, “didn’t do any research before coming to Ghana,” and because of what she saw in the media of Africa, she assumed that Ghana would be “full of poverty,

famine, and unrest, as well as being undeveloped.”¹¹³ Due to these presumptions and lack of research, Lina assumed that Ghana would be in great need of her services. Several volunteers echoed Lina’s essential perception that they were surprised by the extent of development in Ghana. In contrast to their perceptions, Ghana is one of the most politically stable, developed nations with in sub-Saharan Africa. According to a development report completed last year, Ghana is often seen as a “success story” in comparison to other developing nations in sub-Saharan Africa.¹¹⁴ Ultimately, the actuality of Ghana’s stability and growing industrial structure is not always understood by volunteers which then contributes to both misunderstandings *and* justifications in regard to the ethics of helping the distant needy.

Where some volunteers may be primarily motivated by self-interest, as previously discussed, others may be motivated more by a desire, at least in part, to partake in a potentially altruistic endeavor. Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned Nagel’s belief that pure altruism was in fact possible, if the right circumstances were intact that included a direct desire to help the other as the primary intent. With this in mind, in this section I aim to complicate notions of potential altruism within voluntourism. Even if the intent for altruism is there, due to the complications of misconceptions, outcomes, and the connection to tourism, altruism, even in a small way, may not be possible within the volunteer tourism industry.

“I wanted to volunteer because I felt it was my duty as someone who could afford to, to go and help people in places less fortunate than my own,”¹¹⁵ offers Maura, a twenty-four-year-old volunteer from California, who is a registered nurse back in the United States. Maura’s comment directly supports Chatterjee’s assertion that there appears to be a focus on an individual responsibility to help the needy. Although Maura was perhaps more qualified than most volunteers, like Lina and many others, she soon found that she could not help as much as she

claimed to have desired to. When I pressed Maura further to ask if she saw connections between tourism and her project, she said that she was “not a hedonist,” and that her motives were pure. Maura happened to be the only volunteer who claimed a fully formed altruistic motive, but it is certainly possible that there are others who feel the same way.

However, even if Maura’s intent was pure in purpose toward a humanitarian goal, the fact remains that there is still an aspect here that is connected to consumerism and tourism, which complicates notions of altruism. Nagel further explains that altruism can be “merely a willingness to act in consideration of the interests of other persons, without the need of ulterior motives.”¹¹⁶ Namely, for Maura, though she seems to claim ‘pure’ intent, her motive toward feeling as though she had a duty to assist, could complicate notions of ‘ulterior motives’ in that perhaps the primary desire was not altruism but in feelings of guilt and therefore a necessity to assist. Her feelings of guilt, suggested in her comment that she felt a duty because she could ‘afford to’ could negate possibilities of altruistic intent, because ridding the self of the guilt could be the ulterior motive. Additionally, the very nature of voluntourism is one of “potential mutual benefit,”¹¹⁷ and despite concerns that this mutuality may not occur, the benefit to both sides further declines a possibility of altruism.

That said, Maura’s claimed motives were not the norm. As mentioned, most volunteers claimed self-interest, but a few stated a motive rooted in a desire between truly desiring to help and also being cognizant of their motivations to have an experience for themselves. For example, Jenna, a teaching volunteer stated that she wanted to “help a community in need,” and “gain experience in a field” that she cared about.¹¹⁸ Though vague in her description of helping ‘a community in need,’ her phrase was used by several other volunteers, and is in fact listed on the Projects Abroad website as well.¹¹⁹ Jenna’s vaguely stated motive does point to that despite

social idealism promoting altruism or humanitarian initiatives, often volunteers claiming such intents (even in part) arrive with little understanding of both how to help and what it means to do so. Another volunteer mentioned that originally their motivation was to “save” what they believed needed saving, but once they arrived, realizing Ghana was in less need than she thought her trip quickly turned into “mutual learning” rather than saving anyone, even though that had been her intention.¹²⁰ While perhaps these reported intents on doing good is more ‘noble’ in theory than ego boosts or resume builders, it does not quite reach the caliber necessary for altruistic intent.

Ultimately, in this cross-section of voluntourism there appears to be an ethical justification for helping, assumptions made about what is needed, and then a claim of altruism. Yet, as we have seen notions of such theories and justifications complicate all three of these, as well as the misconceptions they may carry. The host communities that are then receiving these volunteers are in potential danger of naïve or self-interest motives that could impact them negatively. Certainly, motivations and claims of altruism can complicate this business for volunteer’s motivations are viewed not only by critics like myself, but by the local community members as well.

It is necessary now to look at how these motivations can inform attitudes of volunteers on the ground and how that affects host communities. Through this we must balance judging the effectiveness or ethicality on the intent or the outcome.

When the Consumer Can Cause Harm: Attitudes and Notions of Entitlement

“When they take a picture of the dirty gutter or of me sleeping on the bench, I feel like, hey! What will you be using that for? Why you taking pictures of Ghana like that? It’s like they

feel they paid that organization to take whatever they please from this country. Whatchu think you buying? You can't buy everything...although," Cynthia smirks, "you could buy me to smile in your picture if you bought me some of that toffee," Cynthia points to the plastic tub of wrapped candies known as 'toffee' and laughs. Doubled over on her wooden stool, Cynthia, slaps her knee and looks up at me with laughter in her eyes, "Oh Akua," she smirks, "you white people can't buy us."¹²¹ Cynthia's wide brown smiling eyes look at me expectantly. Though feeling guilty, silently cataloguing the numerous photographs I have taken and wondering what I have taken for granted, Cynthia has me laughing as well. I smile uncomfortably and nod in response, "no Auntie, we can't." Cynthia grins.

While I laughed in the moment, Cynthia's articulation of the complications of a volunteers sense of entitlement, coupled with the "what" of what volunteers are actually purchasing, elucidates connections toward some crucial ethical challenges within this volunteer travel business. What do these volunteers believe they are paying for? What, or who, are [we] buying? Not only that, but Cynthia's quote points to a potential disconnect between intents of volunteers and the outcome they have on host communities. Where a volunteer may not intend to act as though they feel entitled to whatever aspect of Ghana they would like to metaphorically consume, their actions may complicate relationships and create further tensions. While an industry geared toward both potential mutual benefit *and* humanitarian aid, it seems that more often than not the volunteers are the ones benefitting and host communities "either benefit much less, or even suffer."¹²² Namely, the outcomes of volunteers actions affect the communities they are serving, and without an understanding of how this happens, in perhaps ethically concerning ways, more harm could continue.

Cynthia's point prompts me to wonder if volunteers could be categorized as purchasing an experience. In relation to taking photographs (especially without asking) there is perhaps a feeling that volunteers are 'owed' photographs because they have purchased this experience. As we have seen actual assistance provided and intents of altruism are often far-fetched and rarely, if ever, occur. With this understanding, what is left of these projects may be simply a consumer buying an experience. If that is the case, it may be critical for volunteers to consider acting as an ethical consumer, at least if they want to be cautious about a potential negative impact they could have on a community. An understanding of ethical consumption, particularly in being careful to *not* act entitled as Cynthia suggest volunteers do, could be especially needed here. Since what is being consumed is not entirely clear, there could be cause for seemingly oppressive tensions between volunteer and host.

A consumer, at least in current social norms in westernized understandings, is usually 'entitled' to a certain capital that they have purchased. Additionally, as mentioned previously, there tends to be a general (westernized) viewpoint that the 'customer is always right.' Now, in applying these notions to the pay-to-volunteer industry, with the volunteer as the consumer, there is serious potential for concern if the volunteer is not cognizant of their actions and attitudes that could negatively impact communities. As Cynthia suggests, volunteers often feel "entitled" to a great many aspects of life in Ghana, from photographs to their experience and beyond.

Previous sections have alluded to questioning motives, but now it is necessary to judge the outcomes on the ground, as the actions and attitudes that volunteers take have the most potential for harm. Yet, despite the fact that outcomes hold the highest potential for harm, "service programs tend to be judged on their intentions, not their outcomes."¹²³ Perhaps now, with the ability to analyze actions and attitudes, this section could challenge the norm of focusing

on intentions. In understanding Smart and William's theories on utilitarianism, these theories could lend this section some insight into both a combination of attitude toward entitlement and how to judge outcomes. In salience, in a definition of rule-utilitarianism, Smart and William explain that, "rule-utilitarianism is the view that rightness or wrongness of an action is to be judged by the goodness and badness of the consequences of a rule that everyone should perform the action in like circumstances."¹²⁴ Essentially, saying that ethical correctness is judged by the consequences of an action, and not only the intent. Though this body of work does not aim to say whether the volunteer is right or wrong, this theory can help elucidate connections toward why we can, and should, explore the ethical challenges of volunteers who perform in a way that can have 'bad' consequences: namely act entitled in a negative way.

The ambiguity in what the volunteer is purchasing, as well as the gray line between purchasing an experience that sometimes creates a sense of entitlement, can cause uncomfortable tensions. Besides the obvious costs of meals, housing and transportation fees that can be included in program fees, these volunteer organizations are also selling a support service. They are selling a staff member to pick you up from the airport, someone to show you around the country, provide assistance should a problem arise, and most importantly, set you up with a placement in which you can perform your volunteer duties. Though the explicit costs seem to directly adhere to lines of a business with a margin for profit, what is not elucidated in these program prices is the implicit power of the purchaser's finances to be going toward buying an experience or even a bullet on their resume. Ultimately, as anthropologist Carlos Palacios suggests, this apparent lack of clarity and "ambiguous expectations can take the form of Eurocentric attitudes among the local staff and intra-group conflicts among the volunteers, making both guests and hosts susceptible to frustration."¹²⁵ Volunteers and locals could then lose potential for mutual benefit

on these projects due to ambiguity that could result in volunteers taking it upon themselves to feel entitled to certain things, perhaps based on their consumer role.

In perhaps my most chilling interview, a twenty-year-old female volunteer, Rachael, expressed to me extreme disappointment in Projects Abroad and the hospital she worked at. Despite the fact that she was a pre-med student at a university back home in Toronto, Rachael appeared to feel entitled not just to work in a hospital, but to be assisting in areas she had no expertise. Rachael is one of two volunteers I interviewed that expressed feeling entitled to be doing medicine without experience. Yet, even with experience or qualifications, shouldn't the job experience be given to local Ghanaians who are training to be doctors, and will be there long term to help the community, rather than wealthy volunteers who will be leaving soon? The entire system of medical placements is complicated by a lack of skills and a sense of entitlement. Though Projects Abroad is working on remedying this, the damage in many ways has been done, and in the last year, two hospitals have closed their doors to volunteers in Ghana.¹²⁶ The fact that two hospitals have closed their doors to volunteers is important it alluding to how actions of volunteers have negatively impacted specific placements to an extent that they have expelled the possibility of a relationship between volunteer and those hospitals. Though I was unable to interview any site supervisors who previously supervised volunteers at these closed hospitals, Christian did express to me that the main problem was the attitudes of "entitled volunteers who thought they knew better."¹²⁷ Having not yet interviewed Rachael at this point, I did not quite understand the caliber of his words.

Rachael offers this body of work an extreme example of someone whose motivations and sense of entitlement put Projects Abroad and Ghana in an uncomfortable position. "I am gravely disappointed by the fact that I am not able to do what I want here. I was under the impression

that I would be able to perform surgeries. I certainly paid enough money to be doing so!”¹²⁸

Shocked by Rachael’s comment I could not even ask my next question for a moment. The sense of entitlement, especially toward her role as a consumer, was incredibly concerning. Though I was unable to interview Rachael’s supervisor, in interviews with other medical site supervisors, I found what Christian had articulated, that hospital site supervisors in particular found volunteers attitudes of entitlement particularly concerning.¹²⁹ Money cannot buy you the right to potentially harm a life of someone. Desperately wanting to challenge Rachael’s exasperated comment I swallowed my disappointment and continued along with the interview. However, her comment is critical toward understanding how the consumer nature of volunteering can inform volunteers to act entitled in a way that could raise tensions and harm lives.

Negative outcomes from entitled volunteers could “potentially threaten its [volunteer service] reputation with local residents.”¹³⁰ If the goal of these volunteer service projects is in fact for cross-cultural understanding and meaningful relationships, these concerns of entitlement are increasingly concerning toward not only accomplishing said goals, but in harming relationships with locals. The attitudes of volunteers, and the tensions that arise because of them, could destroy any hope of a positive volunteer service experience.

As May, the law student and site supervisor explained, “the potential for benefit, more than economically, may already be gone, because too many volunteers have hurt relationships with locals perpetuating inequalities within these programs that PA [Projects Abroad] offers.”¹³¹ May’s comment explores an crucial insight toward how volunteers have *already* impacted host communities in ways that have strained relationships. In addition, May seems to have lost hope for successful partnerships in the future, based on the experiences she has had thus far. Namely, due to both the effect Rachael, and other volunteers may have had on host communities, this is

indeed why it may be critical to judge based on outcomes, more than intent. For while motives do help inform us, ultimately the outcomes have the potential to create the most harm.

Rachael is by no means the only volunteer to act entitled on his or her placement through a volunteer organization. Whether volunteers act entitled to perform surgeries they are in not qualified to be performing, (undermining not only medicine in Ghana but the culture itself) or acting entitled in other ways, for special treatment or otherwise, this example and May's response exemplify how this can be understood to be a problematic aspect in the volunteer industry. These attitudes of entitlement create a system in which Ghana is not only underappreciated, but the community members struggle to reconcile with these negative attitudes. These perceptions and feelings then puts these volunteer vacations in jeopardy of simply being a drain on the community, with the only potential gain being economical. If attitudes of entitlement, in terms of volunteers believing they are 'owed' certain privileges, is a belief that is acted upon, as we will see in chapter three there is a potential for paternalism and cultural imperialism. Which only furthers divisions and tensions between guest and host. Ultimately, these attitudes and notions of entitlement, possibly derived from a consumer mindset, put into question any potential for positive relationships between community members and volunteers.

Constructed for Mutual Benefit, but Potentially More Harmful Than Not

Volunteer tourism was constructed with goals of mutual benefit through cross-cultural understanding and relationships, a dabble of development aid work and to be a business. Yet, as this chapter explores there is perhaps more focus on (and examples of) benefit for volunteers rather than a mutual benefit or benefit for host communities. The development aid work is rarely

accomplished due to unqualified volunteers and short-term placements. Then, due to somewhat selfish motives to volunteer, and the perceptions locals have of motivations, the cross-cultural understanding and relationships may be challenged by these motives, especially ones that claim altruism, but in fact could manifest in another form. Though the possibility for altruism was present in theory, above all other reasons, the consumer aspect of voluntourism seems to negate any potential for true altruism. Following concerns of motives, a volunteer's manifestation of a 'customer is always right doctrine' causes some volunteers to feel entitled to certain privileges, such as the right to perform tasks they are not trained for or to take pictures without a cognizance of the rights of the people in the photos. Although not each volunteer will reinforce tensions, and some are cognizant of how to understand their privilege rather than using it as a reason to act entitled, the volunteers that *do* pose strains on host communities are cause for an overall concern within this industry.

Now, what happens when volunteers take their sense of attitude and entitlement past their words and put them into action? What happens when the volunteer thinks they are right and then chooses to enact change without understanding consequences? Building upon motives and attitudes, and these questions, the next chapter will explore actions and tensions. Specifically, in understanding how the volunteer-to-host relationships are challenged by power structures, paternalistic actions and threads of neo-colonialism.

Chapter 3

The Consumed: The Effect of Power Dynamics, Privilege, and Paternalism on Host Communities

Power Structures: Colonial History and Theoretical Framing

“Sometimes, I do feel like they *think* they know what is best for our students here, then they try to act on it! It kinda bugs me ya know, because how would they like it if we went to the US or Europe and said this is how to teach *your* kids?”¹³² This time Cynthia’s comment does not cause me to laugh, even uncomfortably. Here, Cynthia has exemplified several key concerns in the impact that volunteers can have on hosts. In discussing how volunteers who ‘think’ they know what is best and then (potentially) are manifesting these thoughts into action, Cynthia alludes to scholarly cited potential concerns of a “paternalistic relationship”¹³³ between the consumer and the consumed. As Palacios further articulates of this relationship, it is “problematic assumptions like they [Western volunteers] know better than us [local staff],”¹³⁴ that perpetuate structural inequalities and potential for paternalism. Additionally, Cynthia’s rhetorical question of how westerners may react to Ghanaian’s entering the United States or otherwise and imposing their views on a situation, (or education) points to a significant strain in power dynamics and privilege. This chapter aims to explore the connection between these three structures within the volunteer tourism industry.

Before understanding modes of paternalism, power dynamics and privilege, it is important to understand the colonial history of Ghana, as well as post-colonial theories of new forms of colonialism. Though not all voluntourism is in Ghana, arguably each developing nation has at least been affected in some form by western hegemony. Though colonialism is an extreme form of such, for the purposes of this chapter, the history of Ghana is important toward understanding connections to structural inequalities embedded within voluntourism.

Colonialism in Ghana, which until independence was named the Gold Coast, began in the late 15th century and continued until 1957 when they gained their independence. The first colonizers were Portuguese, building the Elmina castle that would be used heavily in the trans-

Atlantic slave trade, as well as trade of gold and ivory.¹³⁵ By the mid-18th century, the Dutch and British had joined colonizing forces and their trading posts and slave castles dotted the extensive coast. From the beginning of the 18th century until the first decade of the 19th century, the slave trade proliferated across the Gold Coast, sending roughly 5,000 slaves per year.¹³⁶ In 1874, though the slave trade was over, the British took over and made the Gold Coast their official colony.¹³⁷ Tensions between the British and Ghanaians were present. From 1806 until 1957, colonial powers and various nation-states (Ashanti, Fante, etc) would struggle against one another for power, with colonial powers continually succeeding until 1957.¹³⁸ The people of the Gold Coast consistently resisted policies of the British, but goals toward decolonialization increased post World War II. Eventually, through the creation of the Convention People's Party in the early 1950s, a coalition founded by the future first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, Britain conceded and the Gold Coast became Ghana. On March 6th 1957, Ghana was the first sub-Saharan country to receive its independence.¹³⁹

Though it has been a little more than half a century since Ghana's independence, the residual trauma of domination, racism and oppression is still heavily present within Ghanaian society today. Following colonialism, although official rule was over, a desire from western countries to continue to profit from African soil, as well as influence institutional practices was still present.¹⁴⁰ Ultimately, the scars left from colonialism were not given much time to heal as mass globalization began to occur. Through this globalization came a proliferation of development initiatives supposedly geared toward altruism informed motives, but arguably forceful in their opposition on many African nations, including Ghana. Today, this "new domination of developing countries by the West,"¹⁴¹ has been termed 'neo-colonialism.' Neo-colonialism is usually defined as a political form of using capitalism, globalization and cultural

imperialism to *control* a country.¹⁴² One general theory behind cultural domination in the potential form of neo-colonialism is that it seeks “to perpetuate relations of inequality and dependence between the West and the rest, and through representation, to perpetuate the construction of others as post colonial subjects.”¹⁴³ Namely, although most countries or people would not claim neo-colonial motives, certain actions do seem to seek to perpetuate relations of inequality and dependency, as well as a desire to impose western ideologies as ‘fact’ rather than suggestion.

One format of domination that is argued to have contributed to neo-colonial practice and imposition is the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout a variety of developing nations, but particularly within Africa. Since the mid-1900s, NGOs have proliferated quickly across many countries, particularly in Africa, and today there are over a 1,000 NGOs in Ghana.¹⁴⁴ Anthropologists have been particularly critical of NGOs, as NGOs, like volunteer tourism, occasionally claim to do more than they actually do and potentially undermine development.¹⁴⁵ Kenyan author and activist, Firoze Manji argues that NGOs have simply represented a “continuity of the work of missionaries and voluntary organizations that cooperated in Europe’s colonization and control of Africa.”¹⁴⁶ He continues by articulating that the work of NGOs on an international level contributes marginally to the relief of poverty, but “significantly to undermining the struggle of African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social and political oppression.”¹⁴⁷ Namely, to Manji, based on his personal experiences of NGOs within his home country in Kenya, and his research on NGO outcomes, he believes that NGOs are simply an additional form of colonialism through a new missionary operative.¹⁴⁸

As of 2013, NGOs have been criticized for their potential harm and forms of neo-colonialism for at least two decades, however, volunteer tourism, which is an industry often compared to NGOs, has only recently begun to be criticized for being another potentially neo-colonial form of various developing societies.¹⁴⁹ As voluntourism has begun to proliferate and more concerns have developed, anthropologist Palacios has asserted that, “charges of neo-colonialism are currently placed on the volunteers themselves and on the ‘voluntourism’ industry.”¹⁵⁰ He continues by explaining that “unethical behavior” of the tourism and voluntourism industry has contributed toward suggestions that “young volunteer tourists might be portraying a new form of colonialism.”¹⁵¹ He explains that because of power dynamics embedded within the voluntourism industry, coupled with colonial history, racial tensions and socioeconomic privilege, the potential for voluntourists to be neo-colonialists exists.¹⁵² This chapter hopes to explore the ethical challenges of both the potential of neo-colonialism existing in Ghana’s voluntourism industry, as well as more generally the concerns of power structures and inequalities.

In chapter two, there was a discussion of the potential harm of motives and attitudes within this industry. This chapter aims to look at what happens when the motives and attitudes are embodied into actions on the ground. First, I will discuss power structures that provide an imbalance of capital between volunteers and locals. Specifically, I will do this with a focus on an imbalance in socioeconomics, neo-colonial attitudes, and racial tensions. Next, using the framework of unequal power dynamics, I will explore the potential of volunteer actions being paternalistic, thus further embodying a neo-colonialist doctrine and complicating the concerns within this industry. Ultimately, this chapter hopes to look critically at the impact of volunteers

on host communities and the possibility of the volunteer tourism industry becoming culturally imperialistic.

Power and Money: An Uncomfortable Inequality

“Sometimes they hold their purses tight around me, as though I will steal from them. Other times they act as if they know better than I do. They pay so much to be here and sometimes they waste it on fighting, complaining or trying to change the community they are supposed to be helping. I feel their incredible wealth shades their experiences here. What they pay for three months here is more than I will make in two years and I already make more than most Ghanaian’s. They will never understand Ghana...”¹⁵³ Christian trails off, as he often does when criticizing volunteers, and leans back in his chair, the plastic legs buckling under the weight of being pushed onto two legs. He rocks forward swiftly and stares at me for a moment. The noisy Ghanaian streets seem silent to me as the words Christian says sink in. Within his words I find meaning in understanding ‘power dynamics’ and its relationship to voluntourism. While I personally try to pride myself on being cognizant of the very aspects Christian speaks of, a part of me feels the jab and I know I will never ‘truly’ understand. That while living in wealthier Ghanaian homes, being able to afford the luxury of flying in and out of the country, and having, in comparison to most Ghanaians, a disposable income while here, I am of an elite group and my wealth does shade my experience.

Christian, a Projects Abroad staff member, is paid the equivalent of one hundred and eighty dollars per month, annually he makes a little more than \$2,000 US dollars a year. In contrast, for a three-month volunteer placement with Projects Abroad, the cheapest option is upwards of \$4,000 US dollars; which does not include a plane ticket which is between \$800-\$2,000 dollars depending on location and time of year.¹⁵⁴ In addition to these costs, according to

the Projects Abroad website volunteers spend on average between thirty-five to one hundred US dollars a *week*, on traveling, souvenirs and additional luxuries.¹⁵⁵ In comparison, the average income for Ghanaians currently resides around \$600 US dollars a year,¹⁵⁶ which is less than half of what Christian makes annually, and weekly is one-third of what the average volunteer spends while in Ghana. While socioeconomics will clearly always be an aspect of volunteer travel to developing countries these statistics show an immense disparity between ability to afford certain luxuries and thus creates a power system. Where clearly the standard of living in Ghana is much less expensive than that of the United States or other ‘westernized’ countries, these figures show vast socioeconomic differences that should be examined more closely. The reality of Christian’s words, not just in terms of disproportionate wealth, but in regards to volunteers never understanding Ghana because of socioeconomics, are crucial toward understanding why there is a concern in volunteer tourism regarding socioeconomic differences.

While these diverse statuses may be seemingly obvious, and just simply an aspect of volunteer tourism, the differences in socioeconomic statuses create a serious unequal power dynamic in the relationships that volunteers enter into with locals. This power dynamic can then shade the experience for both locals and volunteers. As scholar Amanda Moore offers, these “unequal power dynamics may be exacerbated when the intended purpose of the program is to create an appreciation of how the poor live, and the server pays for that experience.”¹⁵⁷ Here, Moore articulates the paradox of consumerism within a system that is intended for service and understanding. As well as, pointing to how inequalities in power dynamics are perpetuated not only by different socioeconomic statuses, but by the simple fact that volunteers are purchasing their experience. In combination with Christian’s comment about volunteers never

understanding, perhaps Moore's comment provides insight to that affect in which due to paying for the experience the relationship of unequal power is often intensified.

As I have shown and others have concluded, voluntourism almost always involves privileged travelers who come from an extremely different socioeconomic status than those they are serving.¹⁵⁸ Costs of volunteer programs are generally several thousand dollars, which almost always places those volunteering in a high socioeconomic status in their own country, let alone within Ghana or other developing countries where placements occur. Based on the vast differences in socioeconomics and understanding of standards of living, volunteers often enter their voluntourist projects "presuming great neediness"¹⁵⁹ in the community, as well as poverty, even if that is not the case. Though there is certainly poverty in Ghana, as explored in chapter two, many of the volunteers were surprised by the caliber of development in Ghana and the lack of 'great neediness,' that they may have presumed. This combination of vastly different socioeconomic experiences coupled with little to no understanding of the needs or reality of Ghana is cause for an imbalance within power structures and cross-cultural understandings.

Tom, a doctor in Ghana who also oversees volunteers on medical placements, explains his experience with this imbalance of power and understanding:

They take their expensive cameras or iPhones and take pictures of our patients who can barely afford the medical care they require, while I can appreciate their curiosity, they do not understand how waving around their symbol of power and wealth is alienating to others in the hospital. Then when we ask to see the photos, sometimes they will pull the cameras back to them as though we are so poor we will steal them. They are both careless with their wealth and conservative – in a way that only hurts their relationships with us and their understanding of Ghana.¹⁶⁰

Tom sighs in between sentences, as he cleans his medical instruments on the tray in front of us, never looking me in the eye. The image of the expensive camera-wielding volunteer taking photographs of patients who are sometimes unable to pay the bills may be alarming, yet in is

reality not uncommon. In Tom's example, volunteers are not only unaware of their status as wealthy (and usually white), but are in fact flaunting their socioeconomic status in the face of those suffering. Tom's observation of both waving around wealth in the faces of Ghanaians, as well as being stingy with their wealth, is not off base from what I have observed on my own travels. Often I would witness volunteers arguing over the equivalent of fifty US cents for a taxi to take them to the market where they would speak upwards of one hundred US dollars. Additionally, several other site supervisors have articulated a similar experience, although perhaps not as poignantly. As can be seen in this example, one of the main issues these socioeconomic differences seems to create is a lack of awareness that many volunteers appear to have. Specifically, a lack of awareness of how their wealth is a symbol of power, and how that power affects the relationships they create and the ways volunteers are perceived.

However, despite socioeconomic differences causing concern, there may be further concerns than simply strained relationships. As Moore argues, "the power differential between the servers and the served runs the risks of demeaning the served, imposing a dominant ideology on disadvantaged individuals and perpetuating oppressive systems."¹⁶¹ Essentially, due to the power differences embedded in this industry, there runs a larger risk than just an unequal relationship and lack of awareness. Moore appears to be suggesting that this power differential can contribute to an imposition on host communities in a potentially oppressive or destructive form.

While working at a school I witnessed a strange exchange of two volunteer teachers giving a gift, that while could be seen with good intentions on behalf of the volunteers did end up creating an imbalanced relationship in the end. As scholar Eliza Raymond asserts, while it has been argued that "volunteer tourism provides an ideal opportunity to increase cross-cultural

understanding, and even develop a sense of global citizenship among participants,” the reality is that one negative externality can in fact be the misunderstandings and unequal dynamics that lead to discomfort.¹⁶² Saliently, despite perhaps pure intentions of the two volunteers, the reality may have been both imposing and problematic due to unequal power structures.

These two volunteer teachers decided to purchase ice cream for three entire classrooms (each about fifty students) and all of the twenty-something teachers at the school. While seemingly a nice gesture, not only did it place teachers and children within an unequal power structure, in which they could not repay gift in any way, but the act could even be seen as a way of ‘purchasing’ the friendship of their Ghanaian co-workers or students. But, who wants to deny that buying people ice cream is wrong? Unfortunately, in this case I watched the relationships between these two volunteers and their co-workers and students deteriorate. Both teachers and children alike would ask the volunteers when they were getting ice cream again, to the point that the volunteers felt uncomfortable in the work place and asked to switch their placements.

While neither these two volunteers nor the school was at fault exactly, the flaunting of the volunteers wealth did cause an imbalance in their working relationship and made it uncomfortable for both sides to continue their work. Though this is not always this case, this example illuminates how wealth can create an unequal power structure within these relationships, especially if the wealth is used in a way that is not fully cognizant of what potential harmful effects could have taken place. As Moore might concur, this could have been an example of ‘demeaning the served,’ therefore perpetuating inequality in relationships. Ultimately, this example of the two volunteers is not particularly harmful, however it does elucidate connections between how wealth differences can create an imbalance for both the volunteer and the host community. Though the volunteers’ unawareness that their act could

cause a power shift in their work place was not necessarily their fault, it certainly did complicate their experience. If the next volunteers arrived in the work place, perhaps they too would be expected to provide ice cream, so then the power of the previous volunteers wealth would create an expectancy and possibility of dependency from the community members.

More than simply a system of power or expectancy, the wealth of volunteers can create a structure of idolization that is based on an unequal power structure and places the volunteers in a power role in which they are idolized and seen as saviors. Despite resentment, often times I found in my own experiences, in interviews and in literature that locals often treated foreigners in a form that placed them as ideal, and something to aspire to at times, with relation to wealth, race, and knowledge. Anthropologist Palacios affirms this notion by offering that often locals will see the wealth and status of the volunteer as an ideal to aspire to, and will use that idea to attempt to embody them.¹⁶³ Thus making cultural imperialism even easier, as many seem keen to absorb knowledge that they may believe will help bridge the socioeconomic gap between them.

Specifically, if looking at schools, the most common placements is teaching.¹⁶⁴ Now in theory, the children learn about other countries through engaging with volunteers, ultimately widening their horizons. Yet, children are impressionable and the unequal power dynamics because of wealth and social capital may not create tensions within relationships between volunteers and children, but may create other problems instead. Children (that are working with volunteers) end up seeing an overly dramatized version of the glamorous western world, regardless of how the volunteer explains their home. Instead of wanting to grow up and work toward development in their own country, many times they appear to desire to instead travel to America or other western countries. Where not inherently a negative desire, it does create a power structure that volunteers have over those they are working with.

In example, I was working on a teaching unit that was aimed toward students ‘dreaming’ about their future. While pure in nature, the assignment in some ways can be criticized for putting an idolized notion of westernized life based on the privilege they observed me to have and the privilege in dreaming of an occupation they may never be able to achieve. Many children said they wanted to be doctors or lawyers, when in most cases for the schools I was working in these students would statistically likely never achieve such a level of education. More so than just potentially unattainable occupations, some students were so focused on westernized dreams that their careers became simply focused on money and luxury: which is exactly what they observed in the nature of the volunteers who donated their time for a few months to working with them.

“When I grow up I want to be a tourist,” says Samson, an eleven year old student. Several students echo his sentiment yelling, “me too!” Uncomfortable by the statement I ask, “why do you want to be a tourist, Samson?” Samson laughs and tells me that he wants to be a tourist because they have “lots of money, can travel anywhere they want, whenever and do whatever they want.”¹⁶⁵ I realized then that even in my cognizance of privilege and wealth, the fact that I was in Ghana, as a white woman from wealthy country, immediately placed me in the spotlight – sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. Despite attempts to pretend my wealth did not exist it always would.

Voluntourism, despite what Raymond asserts about cross-cultural understandings, can often be complicated by power dynamics, in particular, through the inequality of socioeconomic statuses. Wealth disparities between volunteer and host can create desire, as it did with the ice cream case and for Samson’s dream job, but it can also create anger or discomfort, as was seen in Tom and Christian’s assertions about how they understood socioeconomic power structures.

If medical volunteers are waving around their expensive cameras near patients, are the patients supposed to categorize them as ‘benevolent givers’ or as rich observers unaware of their privilege? Saliiently, even though volunteers may enter under the pretenses of benevolence or a combination of benevolence and self-motivation, their wealth, whether flaunted or not, could undermine volunteers understanding the community members in the developing countries where they are volunteering. Thus, cross-cultural misunderstandings due to socioeconomic power differences can lead to further discomfort and inequality between visitors and hosts. This structure of inequality can potentially cause additional concerns within the system of these unequal power relations.

Developments of Paternalism

“Then I took all the canes and snapped them in half. I could not bear to see another teacher beat a student, so I took all the canes and told all the teachers to stop beating the students. I was doing it for the students. The teachers needed to understand, I had to do it,”¹⁶⁶ Jenna looked me straight in the eye as she spoke, her eye contact did not waiver. Hoping to establish a rapport, instead of challenging an action I personally disagreed with, I responded by showing her I was listening with positive minimal responses, such as “mmhmm.” Jenna continued to open up to me about why Ghanaian’s needed to learn that they cannot beat students in schools and how she planned to do her best to teach them. As I listened to Jenna I was struck with two concerns, on the one hand I remembered my immediate flinch, and the upset I felt, the first time I witnessed a teacher strike a student in a Ghanaian classroom. On the other hand, as a visitor, I felt Jenna had no right to break the canes or even tell the teachers to halt a behavior that was ingrained in their culture as legitimate. As a volunteer from another country, an outsider, did

Jenna have any right to do what she did? Yet, on the other hand, can you justify violence against a child? Should beating be allowed in schools? Whose decision should it be?

Where Jenna's intent may have been geared toward an altruistic action, in that it was aimed toward unselfishly devoting herself to the welfare of her students, the effect may have been paternalistic. Paternalistic, as Jenna used her position as an outsider with more capital to assert authority over hosts to do what she believed was best. Though not exactly the definition of paternalism, because of Jenna's social capital in Ghana, financially and racially, she was in a position of authority. Jenna may have used her capital in a condescending nature to do what was 'best' for Ghana, without comprehension the implications or potential consequences for her actions. Was she wrong? As Roberts' infers in his dissertation, "regardless of good intentions and a desire to help less fortunate people, Western volunteers are still heavily influenced by their education and general life experiences, making them excellent transmitters of Western cultural hegemony."¹⁶⁷ Saliently, in relation to Jenna, though she may have had a good intention, she was still transmitting cultural hegemonic principles of the west through her actions further perpetuating inequalities between volunteer and host.

Jenna is not the only volunteer who has asserted her opinion over what should and should not go on in Ghana. In fact, one site supervisor said that his greatest discontent with his volunteers was being "told how to do [his] job,"¹⁶⁸ on numerous occasions. Now, most likely Jenna did not mean to disrupt the balance in the volunteer-site supervisor relationship, however the effect of her actions still requires analysis toward understanding potential for a paternalistic power structure.

Jenna's action in taking the canes to symbolize an end to physical negative reinforcement in the classroom, as well as her reprimand to the teachers, is not a clear wrong or right decision.

On the one hand, many could understand Jenna's frustration or discomfort from working in a community that chooses to use corporal punishment in the classroom as a way of reprimand. On the other hand, if you are not comfortable with physical punishment, do not go to a place where it is practiced. Where corporal punishment in schools is still legal in nineteen states in the United States, it is fairly uncommon, heavily regulated and many assume it is illegal across the nation.¹⁶⁹ Regulation or outlawing corporal punishment in schools is not universally practiced nor agreed upon. However, some people in my generation grew up being socialized to believe that any physical abuse to a child is 'wrong.' Although many in America would be against such corporal punishment in schools, there is not distinctive right or wrong: simply an ethical challenge. Not only that, but even if there was a distinctive 'correct' answer in the United States, it would not apply to Ghana. Yet, at the same time, change begins in small ways and sometimes outside assistance is used in an arguably positive way toward enacting change in a community. However, because Jenna was a visitor to Ghana, her decision still perpetuated dominance simply by the unequal dynamics in the relationships between Ghanaians and volunteers, or any outsider. Though Jenna's feelings about the actions taken against said students cognitively makes sense, her actions cause us to question the boundaries, ethics and complications of these volunteer placements.

From Jenna's point of view, she felt it was an issue of human rights. Whether or not she was aware that corporal punishment in schools was still legal in nineteen states is unclear, but she did mention that the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights should protect Ghanaian children against such abuses. Now, while there is a Universal Declaration of Human Rights, decided upon by the United Nations, not only are the articles themselves up to interpretation, but the very fact that they exist can be questioned in that they could invalidate

cultural practices in ways that are interpreted as harmful to one side, but not to the other side. Namely, in an effort to uphold the virtues of not judging cultures, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) did not even declare a statement on universal human rights until 1999. Previously, the AAA had stated that no such declaration would be universally applicable.¹⁷⁰ In example of such, where there may be no universal consensus: while some would argue that female genital modification is a violation of a human right, others, such as anthropologist Christine Walley, would argue that it is a cultural practice that is important to maintain for that culture.¹⁷¹ Hence, there is disagreement on whether or not there can even be a universal code, to what extent, and of who should be enforcing such a code.

Furthermore every culture is subject to their own set of practices, and who are ‘we,’ being the United Nations or western volunteers, or anyone else, to say that a certain practice is wrong? Namely, while intentions to do ‘good’ may have been present, Jenna’s actions could be seen as incredibly condescending and disrespectful to the community in which she was working. In acting upon a utilitarian belief, it can come across as paternalistic, as it very well may have in Jenna’s case.

According to Mercy, a head classroom teacher who has worked with Projects Abroad volunteers for over seven years, “Ghanaian children need beatings. They won’t listen otherwise and [there is] limited time to teach. That is just how it is.”¹⁷² After Mercy tells me this she shrugs and returns to her Coca-Cola soda. To her, not only is beating not an issue, but it is necessary for effective teaching and time management in the classroom. Ethically speaking, you could argue either that corporal punishment in school is ethical or unethical. Therefore, as it is most times with ethically challenging issues there is no right or wrong answers, simply places where aspects become ethically complicated. Though there are studies that show that the effects of physical

punishment can be detrimental to a child's mental health and can affect their behavior later in life,¹⁷³ there is no proven right or wrong answer to corporal punishment in schools, rather it is a matter of opinion. In the case of Jenna's actions, though she is entitled to her opinion, it does not seem that she was not entitled to her actions. More than non-entitled, Jenna's actions, and those of volunteers who have taking similar actions or attempted to show Ghana what was best for Ghana are in fact perpetuating not only a power system, but one that is almost paternalistic.

When asked about the challenges of working with volunteers, Mercy mentioned that it seemed as though volunteers knew "what was better for Ghana" without understanding their culture or practices. This balance between volunteers wanting to help and also occasionally being forceful in what they believe is best, based on their own socialization, has led to a great deal of discomfort among site supervisors and locals in the community. Most of the site supervisors whom I interviewed mentioned in some form that their biggest concern was a sense that volunteers felt they knew what was better for a particular situation or practice. Ultimately, studies show that volunteers often "enter these communities with little or no understanding of the locals' history, culture and ways of life."¹⁷⁴ Because of this, volunteer's actions can then perpetuate misunderstandings and imbalanced relationships due to an increased barrier through a lack of understanding in culture and privilege. Saliently, not only do Jenna's actions perpetuate an imbalanced relationship, but it also shows a potential lack of care in attempting to understand and accept the culture. One of the key goals in voluntourism, and one of the objectively most attainable, is cross-cultural understandings. Yet, this example, and others, show that actions of volunteers could lead to more misunderstandings than not, or worse a power play.

As Mercy says later, "when volunteers tell me to stop [beating the students] it is as though they are only willing to help if it is going their way. They come across as unwilling to

accept Ghana for Ghana. They act like they know what is best for Ghana.” Mercy’s articulation here complicates simple notions of entitlement discussed previously and points to a much deeper issue of not only entitlement, but an impression that volunteers feel they can or should change aspects of Ghanaian culture. As Roberts’ dissertation on volunteers in Ghana explores, this observed attempt of volunteers toward changing practices “can lead to a Western style of development not suited to the needs or desires of the community”¹⁷⁵ and can therefore increase a paternalistic structure based off of westernized values.

In relation to Mercy’s point of volunteers being “only willing to help if it is going their way,” several times volunteers expressed discomfort over performing tasks that were asked of them. Yet, they were quick to complain when they could not participate in a more complicated procedure or action (that they had no qualifications for). Although this is not the case for all volunteers, it does point to a differing opinion between how volunteers tend to see themselves and how site supervisors experience their volunteer efforts. Namely, Jenna saw herself as performing a necessary task, whereas Mercy felt as though it is not a volunteers place to impose their westernized view of how to act. Though just one example, this does illuminate the potential for harm and cultural imperialism through volunteer service projects abroad.

Volunteer tourism encompasses more than simply the occasional volunteer telling a site supervisor or otherwise what to do, or why their way is wrong – Mercy’s point explores a deeper aspect in which volunteers may be unwilling or unable to let go of their own cultures. This unwillingness could then lead volunteers to capitalize on the power they may realize they have over Ghanaians, based on remnants of oppression in Ghana’s past. Within an already unequal structure, these actions that volunteers take can taint the experience for host communities, causing critical tensions and negating potential for positive benefits within these volunteer-host

relationships. To Mercy, and several other site supervisors I interviewed, when volunteers took action or spoke out against a certain practice it could be perceived as coming across as paternalistic, which then degrades the community, even if the intent was altruistic in part.

While voluntourism is neither argued to be purely altruistic nor is anyone saying it is always paternalistic, the challenges that occur from patronizing behaviors can harm the communities. Even if volunteers are cognizant of their roles, privilege, and power, there can sometimes be aspects of patronizing behavior or at least a power play that misses the mark. Unless one allows themselves to be fully accepting of the community they are volunteering in, they could invalidate that culture or community, furthering tensions within the voluntourism industry. But as volunteers arrive with their learned set of western values, these can bleed into volunteers manifesting their values into action in potentially harmful ways, even with good intents. Though the potential for mutual benefit does exist, as we have seen, patronizing actions of volunteers have harmed relations with community members therefore decreasing effectiveness. Ultimately, the ethnographic revelations of how volunteers act and how hosts understand volunteer actions allows for a more fruitful and holistic understanding of the complications within this industry.

Are Volunteers Reproducing Neo-Colonialism in Ghana?

Through good intents, if not paternalistic and cautious of socioeconomic privileges that can alienate relationships with locals, volunteers are supposedly able to benefit communities. Voluntourism has created a system where the volunteer is transformed into a “benevolent giver and the community members into the ever grateful receivers of charity.”¹⁷⁶ Yet, the complications in how volunteers act and are received complicates this supposed structure, that

ultimately is aimed at creating dependency. In essence, the community members are simply ‘supposed’ to accept the charity without questioning it, but this often results in quasi-power play, and one that is vaguely reminiscent of cultural imperialism and neo-colonial motives.

With an overwhelming majority of all these wealthy, elite volunteers being Caucasian racial tensions become embedded within this power structure, that in addition to being contentious can be read as reminiscent of colonialism. Although perhaps not intentional, in the wealth capital that volunteers have over Ghanaians, as well as their supposed benevolence that should just be accepted, even if disagreed with, an imbalance is born. Though volunteers claim to ‘help’ they may in fact be perpetuating notions of colonialism in a new form.

As B. Lough explores, volunteer tourism has the potential to “reproduce or reinforce existing inequalities, create dependencies and a ‘new form of colonialism’ [that] contributes to elitism, or advances [volunteer] interests over host community goals.”¹⁷⁷ Essentially, Lough’s articulation can assist in framing an idea of neo-colonialism in volunteer service in Ghana. Through existing structural inequalities of power in voluntourism this industry does hold the potential to create a new form of colonialism, especially when volunteers take it upon themselves to instill what they believe is right for Ghana; as Jenna did with breaking the canes and attempting to halt corporal punishment in the classrooms.

Several claims have been made to the effect that voluntourism is perpetuating voluntourism. One study argues that voluntourism “raises the specter of neo-colonialism in the tacit assumption that even ignorant Westerners can improve the lot of the people in the South.”¹⁷⁸ Several other articles have produced similar arguments, suggesting that the ineffectiveness and images of neediness provide for an unequal balance that ultimately raises questions about colonialist remnants. Another anthropological article suggests that voluntourism could be

“perpetuating the cultural, political and economic hegemony of “First World” over “Third World” countries.”¹⁷⁹ Ultimately, in looking at Lough’s articulation that voluntourism is reinforcing inequalities, increasing dependence and creating a new colonialism, as well as the idea that ignorant, yet powerful westerners can improve and influence the ‘Third World,’ perhaps lies an ability to analyze the connection between voluntourism and neo-colonialism. In the end, how different is voluntourism from colonialism in all actuality?

“They think they can just come in here and change how we do things!”¹⁸⁰ yells Mercy, a teacher angered by a volunteers’ decision to teach her students to drink water during lunch. A custom that is usually not practiced in schools in Ghana in order for children to fill up on food rather than water. Mercy is not the only person in a host community that has been affected by volunteers deciding to adhere their values or knowledge as necessary changes in society.

Throughout this chapter there are numerous examples of how volunteers have been unaware of their privilege, power and paternalistic tendencies. All of these examples contribute to a potential for neo-colonial remnants in that volunteers are imposing their views, under the façade of simply helping a community in need. As we now know, goals of assistance or mutual understanding are occasionally challenged by the tensions that erupt out of motives, attitudes, actions and power dynamics. The continuation of white faces imposing westernized values provides for a complex dynamic, especially within Ghana and its history of colonialism. Though there are no pure deductions of whether or not voluntourism is a new form of colonialism, the power structures outlined and the reported experiences of hosts do suggest a potential connection.

Chapter 4

Racial Tensions in Voluntourism:

The 'White Woman Complex' and 'Othering'

Framing Race

“Typically, this is the role of a white woman. I’m black and that complicates things...it is almost as though I am invisible here,”¹⁸¹ reflects Sahara on her experience of volunteering abroad. Sahara, who was one of two African American informants of mine, participated in volunteer tourism through teaching in various schools during her summer vacation from university. Statistically, in her observation, Sahara is not incorrect. Sahara and I discussed, in great depth, her complex relationship to her volunteer work and her love for Ghana, paired with her inability to ignore the racial trials that she faced as the only volunteer on her program that was not a white woman. Selfishly, as we spoke, my own critical view of my personal role within Ghana became the forefront of my thought process. Instantly, I felt guilty for perpetuating this stereotype within an already ethically complex industry that I further had concerns regarding. Together, Sahara and I developed a dialogue on how to communicate both about the stark differences in her experience, versus those of her white female co-workers, as well as, her own battle with feeling invisible within a structure in which her peers were dramatically visible. In almost all other ways, outside of race and gender, Sahara’s trip was a ‘typical’ voluntourism project: pay the organization, purchase round trip plane tickets, arrive, be oriented by staff, volunteer for a set period of time, fly home and return to everyday life. However, Sahara’s experience was nothing close to ‘typical,’ and furthermore should demand attention toward analyzing the complexities of race (and gender) within this volunteer tourism industry. With Sahara’s story as a jumping point, we can come to develop a deeper understanding of how racial dynamics with an inverse of a ‘typical’ voluntourism experience challenge the contours of the voluntourism phenomenon.

Voluntourism is many things. One thing it is not is diverse. Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of those embarking on these pay-to-volunteer programs are white females. Not only is this observation available ethnographically, but it also is reflected statistically. Projects Abroad, one of the largest volunteer organizations internationally, has over 50,000+ alumni. Out of those fifty thousand, approximately five percent have been black and another seven percent were of a race other than Caucasian. Additionally over seventy percent of volunteers on said programs are female.¹⁸² Research on international volunteer service thus far has also corroborated this observation, even across many other volunteer organizations, reiterating that white and female are two of the most common attributes among volunteers.¹⁸³ With a lack of racial diversity, paired with responses and observations of racial tensions within voluntourist programs, it becomes crucial to digest these statistics more analytically. Volunteer tourism in and of itself holds a great deal of ethical issues to be discussed, and the topic of race and gender only further complicates the issue. With a rapid increasing trend of voluntourism in our world today, it is time to problematize, and simultaneously attempt to unpack, this reoccurring ‘white woman’ theme within the voluntourism phenomenon.

Throughout this body of work we have divided understandings between the volunteer and the host community. This chapter aims to bring together an understanding of both more holistically on a critically crucial aspect within this industry. Earlier in this text I mentioned an ethical concern being racial tensions, within the already complex power dynamics embedded within these volunteer tourism experiences. In this chapter, we will delve further into the complexities of racial tensions as an ethical concern, as well as understanding connections to gender. There several areas in which I aim to deepen the conversation regarding race, gender and voluntourism while adding nuance to the voluntourism industry itself. Through a combination of

ethnographic data and an analysis of literature on whiteness and development aid work, I will explore potential connections between socioeconomic status, the media and historical context and its' relation to what I will refer to as the 'white woman complex'. Through this process, I will observe the ways in which these three factors contribute to a majority of white (and usually female) volunteers, while also exploring racial and cultural tensions observed through this lens. First, I will discuss where the majority of whites may derive from. Secondly, I will discuss gender constructions that may aid in the majority being female. Next, I will explore the media and how that additionally perpetuates white female majorities. Taking the media further, within these frameworks I will unpack misconceptions derived from the media, as well as results of 'othering' and a desire for a 'white savior' created through media propaganda. To do this I will integrate responses of volunteers, as well as a dissection of responses by local community members involved in voluntourism, both regarding their understandings of racial complexities and tensions when norms are broken. Lastly, I will comment upon a lack of volunteers understanding racial concerns further complicates the volunteer tourism industry. Ultimately, this chapter hopes to be an exploration of both what I call the 'white woman complex' as well as other forms of racial concerns embedded within voluntourism.

The 'White Woman Complex'

Staring back at the photograph, my white complexion shines fluorescently against the reddish-brown dirt houses and the sea of darker faces that surround me in the picture. Smiling faces, however fabricated, plaster the frame in what looks like a quintessential picture of a white woman with her classroom in Africa. I can no longer look at the picture with a smile. Perceptions of my race and my role outweigh my ability to look simply at the picture of what 'should be

happiness' and it begs me to look deeper. I am a white woman, of a privileged class, ultimately the bourgeois. I have purposefully placed myself within Ghana - to do what? To change the world? To promote social justice? To have a life-altering experience? To teach art? What responsibility do I have to question my motives, my actions and my effect? I am as eager to 'help' as I am to question what I am doing there. Sitting on the plane home to the United States I hold this picture of me posing with one of the many classrooms I worked in and I attempt to wrap my head around what has occurred.

Thus far, we have defined a theoretical fact: the majority of participants in these volunteer tourism programs are white, and usually white women. Further studies suggest that additionally most volunteers are "educated and affluent."¹⁸⁴ As we discussed in chapter two, we have looked at the conceptions of why *people* volunteer, but we must now further this to understand why white women are the majority of said people who volunteer. In this discourse, we must first discuss whiteness in volunteer tourism and development work from a theoretical perspective. Secondly, we must then understand in what ways the 'white woman complex' and their desire for altruism efforts further affects this construct. In essence: who are these white women and why do they dominate this complex industry?

In the fifteen interviews I did with volunteers, ten identified as white females. In asking them why they chose to volunteer in Ghana I received many similar responses. Answers varied in length and level of articulation, but generally a consensus was reached. Almost all the volunteers I interviewed, regardless of race said in some form or another that they wanted to: do something different, help people, and boost their resume. When I asked the white female volunteers why they believed they were the majority of volunteer demographics, I received many mixed responses. While some were completely oblivious to the trend, others had noticed and

thought about it a little bit, but no one admitted to thinking or considering that they were in the majority (or why that was) before electing to volunteer abroad through Projects Abroad.

Melanie, a nineteen-year-old volunteer from Kansas, stared at me with a wide-open mouth when I asked her about her opinion on why volunteer tourism was a white female dominated field.

“Wow...honestly...” she responded, “I had never really thought about it or noticed it. I mean, I noticed we were mostly white, but that is because we are vividly noticed here and called ‘obruni’ everywhere we go. I guess if I had to pick a reason I would say that women, especially in the United States, want to be seen as good people who are helping out - and so then we go to Africa and volunteer – because that’s what we see being done. It was not the experience I thought I was signing up for, but like I saw stuff on coming and helping these places, and wanted to do something new, and thought I could do some good. The fact that we are white is just from more white people being shown volunteering and us continuing that I think.”¹⁸⁵

Melanie’s opinion that the white female majority is due to women in America desiring to be seen as altruistic people and acting upon media representations may have some validity. Though her statement can not universally determine if her motivations, that were based on media and wanting to ‘do some good,’ is how other volunteers understand their own motivations, it does bring up some interesting points. Additionally, as discussed in chapter two, research does show that motivations can be attributed to a desire for humanitarianism, although that is not always the case and is definitely complicated regardless. Ultimately, Melanie’s comment asks us to look deeper at the complexities of how gender is constructed, in relation to women wanting to be seen as ‘good people,’ how aid work is portrayed and how race is recognized within Ghana. Though Melanie did not mention media or historical constructions of gender outright, her

comment does touch upon them. Interestingly, although perhaps not surprisingly, Melanie had a much different view of her part in the majority than her supervisor in Ghana.

“They want to do something with their lives to make them feel better about themselves and from this we get first those can afford, then who see it is popular, and then who realizes it will look good - that ends up generally being, yes, white girls,”¹⁸⁶ confides Christian, a thirty-one year old Ghanaian man who has worked for Projects Abroad in Ghana for ten years (and is one of Melanie’s supervisors). Christian sits back in his chair, his arms folded over his lap as he explains this to me. He appears withdrawn, as he leans back and alters his body language, as though he wishes the interview were over.

Though I have known Christian since July of 2009, he still seems skeptical of my time in Ghana, my position in my NGO and in regard to my decision to investigate ethical and racial challenges within Projects Abroad and volunteer tourism. Christian has complained to me several times over the past few years, off the record, about his dislike for Projects Abroad as an organization. He feels that it is a way for whites to continue being in Ghana, yet not being cognizant of their race, privilege and imposition on the country. Christian has expressed a dislike in the level of respect he feels that Projects Abroad staff, like himself, and site supervisors receive from volunteers. Occasionally, he will end conversations about his feelings regarding race, privilege and volunteers by telling me “no offense, Akua,” if he seems to think I would be offended as someone of the race he is criticizing, yet still calling me by what is my ‘given’ Ghanaian name. Though we talk often, there will always be a boundary between us, one that Christian has chosen to enact – and I have respected. As I watch him lean back in the chair and appear uncomfortable, I wonder if perhaps Christian’s discomfort stems from socioeconomic and racial inequalities within the nature of Projects Abroad and volunteer tourism as a whole.

However, in watching his body language, I decide to stop asking questions for the day and I ask him if he would like to stop talking. He nods, while getting up from his chair and showing himself out.

Christian's statement brings us to a chillingly important map of the 'white woman complex,' while also bringing in two new aspects unrecognized (or unsaid) by Melanie and other volunteers: affluence and recognition. The statistics prove the racial and gendered majority, but Christian's comment begs us to look further at socioeconomics, the media, and the desire for altruism (and recognition) as fundamental reasons behind this majority phenomenon. The juxtaposition between Christian seeing socioeconomics as primary and Melanie, and others, not even mentioning money as a factor leads us to further question understandings of privilege and inequality.

Money, Money, Money.

As is the name of the game, voluntourism requires a hefty fee. As the majority of wealth in this world is held in the elite bourgeois who overwhelmingly tend to be white, it would make sense then that the majority of those who participate and can afford these programs are in fact: white. Volunteer organizations vary in prices for the organized placements that they offer, but in general they range from anywhere between \$800 a month to \$8,000+ a month depending on the nature of the volunteer work, benefits offered, and the size of the volunteer organization itself. These prices, even the highest ones, generally do not include airfare, which can be up to \$2,500 depending on where one is flying. Ultimately, for a month long volunteer tourist trip, a volunteer could be paying somewhere between ~\$2,000-10,000 for the trip, which does not include money

spent on weekend travel, artisan stands and other luxuries. These prices fundamentally require that those who can afford to embark on these trips be of a higher socioeconomic status than the vast majority of the rest of the world. This level of socioeconomics is just one layer as to what adds to the ‘whiteness’ aspect of voluntourism, but points to a crucial ethical challenge within this construct. Outside of the previously discussed power structures in socioeconomics, the combination of socioeconomics, colonial remnants *and* white majorities, cause these tensions in socioeconomics to be even more clear and fruitful.

Statistically, minorities, older adults, disabled persons and those of lower socioeconomic statuses represent the smallest portion of international volunteer service projects.¹⁸⁷ The three factors prior to lower socioeconomic statuses could all potentially be related to socioeconomics as well. Regardless of other ethical concerns within volunteer tourism, the socioeconomic demographics these organizations then allow and encourage to participate severely shrink following these price realizations.¹⁸⁸

“The amount they pay for one month here is more than I’ll ever see in my lifetime,”¹⁸⁹ Joshabell explains to me. Together, Joshabell and I sit on plastic chairs in the school courtyard, drinking Fanta from glass bottles with straws. She has recently overheard a volunteer state the amount they paid to be here and converted it into her local currency (\$5,500 USD for five weeks). Joshabell expresses to me that for her job as a full-time preschool teacher, she receives sixty Ghana cedis a month, which accounts to a little less than thirty US dollars a month. Joshabell’s realization of the economic disparities between her own culture, and the culture that those who are volunteering arrive from is staggering. She later explores with me that although she can be close with the white volunteers who can come to work at the school she works at, she says that, “my skin and money will never relate to them.”¹⁹⁰ Further alienating bonds, the racial

and socioeconomic differences not only breed white majorities volunteering, but provide for tensions regarding their different lifestyles. From numbers, we see who can afford these projects (usually whites), but from Joshabell we can see how the economic disparity plays out in creating further tensions within an already complex industry. These tensions, though beginning with socioeconomic tensions, end up encompassing racial tensions as well due to the nature of its relevance in voluntourism.

Societal Structures & Gender Ideology

To this point, we have extensively discussed socioeconomics, power, privilege and the tensions that then arise as a result. Though important toward understanding racial tensions, the gendered aspect of the ‘white woman complex’ is equally important. Where we may now understand white majorities in part - why female?

Earlier, Melanie referenced an idea that in her opinion women “want to be seen as good people who are helping out.” Where Melanie may have a point, the historical construction of gender may be more complicated than this, and further than socioeconomics or even just wanting to be seen as ‘helping,’ a socialized gender construction may contribute greatly to the majority of white women volunteering. Though this gender construction may be portrayed through the media, the historical junction of its’ construction begs for further analysis.

Through carefully constructed media campaigns, there is something sensational, exciting and exotic that develops in the construction of these volunteer tourist programs. From the travel brochures to the volunteer websites to the news specials and beyond, the media portrays voluntourism to be something coveted. Something available only to the elite, who not only can

afford the luxury of it, but who are ‘truly altruistic people’ aiming to ‘make a difference’ in the world.

Though not always the case, those who fit into this category of ‘do-gooders’ who want to have access to the foreign world, so that they can share their values with the communities, are generally women. There are several reasons why this is potentially the case. One reason could be the consistent media portrayal of white women being in the forefront of this field. Therefore, white women’s eyes are cued in to see people similar to them, thus justifying their desires to go out into the development work. Several of my informants who were volunteers confided that they decided to go and volunteer because of videos, news stories and pictures they saw about volunteers in Ghana and other locations. One female volunteer remarked that the pictures she saw made Ghana appear as a “safe for young women, yet exciting”¹⁹¹ place for her to go and volunteer. Part of the appeal of these programs then, could be adventure that also looks manageable for the young women who decide to go. As the demographics of volunteer organizations show that over seventy percent of volunteers are between the ages of 20 and 30 years old,¹⁹² and the majority women, having a safe image of a location that is exemplified through the media then becomes of crucial importance due to societies tendency to ‘coddle’ young women. Now, obviously volunteering abroad is not the same as a charity project back home, seeing media representations of women volunteering could contribute to a females decision that these projects were worthwhile.

Examples of socioeconomics, media, colonial undertones and racial tensions – though still tending to be white women – *can* also all apply to white males as well. However, there is another potential reason as to why volunteers are generally white women. Through developing an understanding of what I will call ‘social construction of gender responsibility’ we can begin to

unpack a more nuanced understanding of why the white female demographic is overly represented in volunteer tourism. In comprehending historical constructions of gender toward explaining theories of the ‘white woman complex’ we may be able to further our understanding of this majority group within voluntourism.

“Society constructs us as nurturers, so it makes sense that we would want to give back abroad, given that history,” offers Susie, a volunteer who unlike many, seemed to understand many of the complications and concerns of volunteer tourism. As previously mentioned, Susie is a certified teacher back in Canada and her placement in Ghana was also teaching. Susie may have a point.

Women (particularly in westernized society) are portrayed, objectified and nearly idolized as nurturers, charity workers and motherly figures. In historical (and socially constructed) constructions of gender, men made the money, while women nurtured children and engaged in meaningful charity projects, usually within the church. Women, in these politically correct roles, ‘took care’ of those that needed them, namely, their husbands, their children and their God (or others in their chosen charity work). Perhaps, today is the new millennium gender construction of young women being nurturers and caretakers of the needy (developing) world.¹⁹³ Though not grounded in factual notions, both Susie’s idea and these understandings of gender constructions do raise a potentially fruitful speculation.

Historical, and even current, gender constructions of masculinity do not promote going out in the world to volunteer or engage in charity work. Still today, men are shown to be physically strong, financially stable and in control. The gender role for men does not include valiant efforts to be a nurturer – and saving the world is definitely not in the conservative narrative of gender roles for men. Where as women on the other hand are not only portrayed as

the ones who ‘help’ others more, but they seem much more likely, even within the United States to be engaging in charity work. Whether their charitable actions are based on their ‘nature’ or their construction as ‘nurturers’ is not definitively answerable – but we can attempt to elude to connections nonetheless. Though certainly not the only reason, gender constructions are some of the only potential connections I can discern that would explain why these programs have such a high majority of women, overwhelmingly white women.

Additionally, taking the idea of men being the financially stable ones and women being the nurturers, even today, despite progression in gender norms, men are still earning more financially. This reinforces the ideology of men being the ‘breadwinners’ of the families. Despite perhaps attempts at raising the glass ceiling when it comes to economic equality in paychecks amongst genders, women and men are still not earning equally. These facts play out in deeper constructions toward young men often having their eyes on a ‘future paycheck,’ much more than perhaps women do. If you look at an undergraduate university, for example, chances are high that the fields with social sciences and the arts versus hard sciences or business will show an unequal gender distribution, with a much higher percentage of women in social sciences or the arts and men with a much higher percentage in hard sciences or business. Arguably, professions in the hard sciences and in business, generally create a larger paycheck than those in social sciences or the arts. College aged students generally contribute to the largest percentage of volunteers, more so than white or female – what most have in common across the board is being between sixteen to twenty-five years of age.¹⁹⁴ With these young male volunteers usually looking toward a profession and toward being the financial breadwinner of the family, perhaps young men do not see as much space created for them in the field of voluntourism. Whereas maybe

women feel they can carve out this space for themselves more easily with (statistically) less of a focus on a lucrative career for their future job.

In 2008, over three-quarters of physicians were men, where as that same year over seventy six percent of teachers were women.¹⁹⁵ Physicians without a doubt have higher salaries than teachers, and though there are female physicians and male teachers, the gender distribution is apparent. With a value in our society toward capitalism and financial stability, men continue to be in the forefront of these earnings, while women continue to not only be earning less, but even in so far as training themselves, tend to go for jobs that earn less. We have already established that those who engage on these trips are already of an elite social class able to afford the enormous financial strain of these programs, and within this group there is perhaps more men of these elite socioeconomic structures that are more focused on a future job than on the ‘doing good’ that is proposed in voluntourism projects. From this, we can wonder, if the gendered societal focus of men needing to achieve and be breadwinners has led to some indirect evidence on why there is a white female majority in volunteer programs abroad. Perhaps, white women of this elite socioeconomic statuses feel as though they are more *able* to create space for themselves to engage in the luxury of these volunteer programs; where as men feel too focused on preparing themselves for a future job.

Daniel, a white male from Minnesota volunteering in a hospital in Accra, explained to me that his reasoning for volunteering abroad was because his mother, “said it would help [him] get into med school.”¹⁹⁶ Though he later stated that his trip had become “much more than that,” his initial reasoning was still toward a goal for an occupation that is prestigious and pays. For the men who do volunteer abroad, less than five percent do placements other than medical or sports.¹⁹⁷ Where as for women, the high majority of volunteer placements are in teaching or

working in orphanages (which are both ‘jobs’ that will earn less than doctors). From these facts and generalizations, although holding few examples in terms of occupations available, there seems to be at least some relation as to why societal constructions of gender could contribute to such highly disproportionate ratios in gender amongst those who could afford to volunteer abroad.

In furthering this nuanced white woman complex outside of gender constructions and a socialized responsibility toward future jobs, there could additionally be an aspect rooted more psychologically, nested in a collective historical trauma of women today. Wanda Vradi, believes that the motivations are through white women who “use charity and philanthropy toward colonial subjects and the domestic poor as a way to carve out a space for themselves in the public sphere and assert their equality vis-à-vis white men.”¹⁹⁸ Saliently, Vradi is arguing that, at least partially, women are using this opportunity to portray a strength against former patriarchal colonialism, but in a way that is “more philanthropic” than missionaries were, in order to assert their equality to men.

This idea could be understood in several ways. First, in understanding the public versus private sphere, traditionally men have always been in the public sphere in terms of occupation and recognition, while women have generally been in the private sphere, of homemakers and mothers. Now, with this growing trend of voluntourism, perhaps this majority and Vradi’s speculation can be attributed to women asserting themselves in the public sphere in a way that still aligns with the nurturing qualities in gender constructions. Vradi’s articulation also supports in part the idea that women have more politically and socially constructed ‘space’ to do such volunteer work for men are already in the public sphere in a very prominent way – they do not need these to boost their success. Additionally, Vradi’s quote begs us to wonder if perhaps

women are volunteering in order to show they are in some way ‘better’ than white men, vis-à-vis an attempt at philanthropy in the ‘needy’ world. As Melanie had suggested, women may want to be seen as doing good, but no one specified to whom we want to be seen by, maybe Vraști is right in presuming that women carve this space in order to assert equality (or be more appealing) to our male counterparts. There is definitely a sense of virtuous behavior that seems to appear in the volunteer efforts of women, and perhaps it has something to do with the asserting equality.

Whether it is women being more ‘nurturing,’ or less inclined to be focused on making a career domestically, or carving equality against white male counterparts, the fact is that women, white women, are dominating the voluntourist industry. We see this in numbers, but also in the media.

The Media We Live In

Thus far, we have classified a socioeconomic factor and potential social constructions of gender in the voluntourism field. However, I would like to argue that it is more than just the socioeconomic status and gender constructions that brings white women to volunteer in mass numbers. Though white bourgeois in the United States do hold the highest percentage of wealth worldwide, wealth is not the sole proprietor of this phenomenon – nor is gender construction. As my informant Christian believes, another step is those “who see it as popular,” namely, the media, in all its varied forms. Though the gender constructions are important, much of those are repeatedly reaffirmed through our constant barrage of media.

The pieces of media portrayal are complex, the perpetuating images of particularly white women volunteering, in Africa and otherwise, could potentially have an influence on the majority figures we observe. As Melanie explained, it was from seeing images like herself that in part convinced her to participate in her volunteer program. In glancing at the Projects Abroad

website, I clicked ten different pages within the Ghana section. Out of those ten pages, there was one Asian male, two white males, and thirteen white women.¹⁹⁹ Though not a particularly scientific way to go about determining media representations, it does show a small example. To someone perusing the website and considering Ghana, it appears the majority is white females (and statistically it is). If you type ‘volunteering abroad’ into a Google search, and click on images, all of the first twenty-one images you can see on the page are white volunteers. Fourteen out of twenty one photos either feature, or have, a female in the photograph, and all but two feature small children. We are seeing the majority, as well as imagery of children, further popularizes the mothering, nurture aspect, and thus the media continues to perpetuate this majority. Who came first: the majority of white females? Or the media that supported it?

As Christian argued, volunteer tourism appears ‘popular.’ These photographs of smiling white female faces plaster social media sites and beyond with the adorably posed pictures of these volunteers with ‘orphans’ strategically placed on their laps for the perfect photo. From Facebook to travel blogs to various articles about volunteering abroad, most of these sites offer similar picture snapshots.²⁰⁰ What ‘we’ (being anyone observing volunteer tourism) see is the white females smiling and the captions with hearts, and occasionally the ‘exotic’ name of the orphan or school child. What we do not see is the racial tensions within her work place, an understanding of the life these children are living, or any practical information about what good voluntourism is doing for these communities.

The mass media is a form of information that influences our thoughts on levels we cannot even fully comprehend. It has a massive effect on not just voluntourism, but in particular toward the ‘white woman complex’. Media affects our view of volunteering abroad, making it sexy and coveted, while also carefully constructing the presence of the “other,” namely, the ones ‘in need’

of our volunteer efforts. We see these affects of media on voluntourism portrayed in a variety of ways.

“Hot off the Press: See What the Media is saying about Projects Abroad” reads the headline on the Projects Abroad website. The link takes you to a video clip on NY Nightly News with Chuck Scarborough, the vice president of Projects Abroad in the New York office.²⁰¹ The news anchor opens by staring at the camera and saying, “Are your high school graduates thinking of taking a little time off before college? Are they begging you for a trip to Europe? How about sending them to several countries perhaps – *foreign* countries where they’ll do volunteer work on service projects that *actually help* the global communities,”²⁰² (emphasis mine). Here, before the interview with Scarborough has even begun we have an example of how these projects are promoted in terms of a ‘othering,’ and a ‘need’ for the service projects, while also constructing a narrative that is intriguing and begs the viewer to keep watching.

Are countries in Europe not foreign countries? For New Yorkers, the first intended audience of this evening news segment, Europe is just as much a foreign continent as Africa. Yet, the news anchor refers to Europe as a place you beg for a trip, but refers to these service projects differently. “How about sending them to several countries perhaps – foreign countries” says the anchor, as though sending a child to Europe is not also encompassing of several foreign countries. Perhaps this is because they do not have the same exotic appeal as these volunteer programs in ‘needy’ places. By using foreign in this way it is just one example of how the media is ‘othering’ the countries that voluntourism generally occurs within.

Next, the anchor adds to his statement regarding foreign countries by saying that in these countries, it is “where they’ll do volunteer work on service projects that *actually help* the global communities.” Yet, there are no references to what needs to be done within said foreign

countries or in what ways they are helping, or even the local community responses to being ‘actually helped’. . Again, here in this example the media is perpetuating stereotypes of the ‘needy,’ underdeveloped and ‘foreign’ (read exotic, different, strange) countries. Throughout the entire interview, there is no mention of what exactly is needed in these countries, only the mention that these service projects actually help (they mention Ghana, Peru, India and Thailand). Although many have today have come to understand that the media is a business, just like volunteer tourism, and it aims to incorporate what will sell (literally or figuratively), the fact remains that the ‘actual help’ is not corroborated by these countries, which only further creates tensions between host communities. As previous chapters have alluded to, host communities seem to be all but forgotten in the name of altruism, and actual development goals are not mentioned in the media or even upon arrival to host locations.

The interview clip is short, but even in the first four seconds the media has managed to affect our view (one-sidedly) of these programs. The screen then cuts to Scarborough, who is explaining a specific program within Projects Abroad that is particularly for those electing to go on a ‘gap year’ (another popular new phenomenon in today’s tourist industry). Scarborough explains that gap year programs and volunteer programs alike have been “a very popular concept, that is growing in popularity.” While he is speaking, some gritty film footage of, surprise, surprise *all white* volunteers (although a few male, majority female) engaging in various projects fills the screen. The flashy images range from having ethnically diverse kids hanging off the white volunteers backs to volunteers leading classrooms to a volunteer holding up a baby sea turtle toward the screen with a large smile and the beautiful coral reefs below. The ‘field’ footage is geared toward making the projects look fun and *needed*. The mention of

popularity and the image of all white volunteers in this media clip all perpetuate media showing us voluntourism as a 'sexy and coveted' program – and again one that is white dominated.

Adding to this, Scarborough mentions that the full gap year program is a staggering \$30,000 US dollars for the eight months. He says “it may seem like a lot, but we include insurance and..” and then goes on to briefly highlight what is included in the project fee. For those who can afford the \$30,000 dollars for the gap year, they would perhaps not catch the intensity of the number for if they can afford such a fee they are already living in extreme privilege. They might only see the excitement on the faces of the volunteers 'doing good' and its presence on television, reiterating its desirable nature. For someone, which includes the majority of people, who could not afford this fee, but is hooked by the media representation of the program, voluntourism then becomes increasingly coveted as it something they will not be able to be a part of. It is an experience, a luxury, out of their league – only for those who can afford to 'help' – and from the images on the screen it looks like only white people and again mostly female.

There are dozens of examples of how, and where, the media perpetuates a sense of 'otherness' coupled with desire, do-goodism and whiteness in its representation of volunteer projects. This video clip from the NY Nightly News and reference to images seen on the Internet are just two small examples of how this stereotypical portrayal further presents a reasoning behind this 'white women phenomenon' of a majority of white women volunteering.

During their interviews, as stated earlier, Christian and Melanie both mentioned that they believed part of the motivation to volunteer could come from either doing these projects to look good and/or wanting to do good, depending on which narrative you believe in. Through videos like the one referenced above, and other media efforts, we see popularized images of Africa (and

other ‘developing’ areas) and are given information through the media that we can be of service to help these places. Yet, as we have previously discerned, often times the amount of help needed or the amount of help under-qualified young adults can actually do is misrepresented, both by the general media and publicity attempts from voluntourist organizations.

As Barbara Heron suggests, through media, we frame the spaces ‘in need of development’ (or volunteer work) as “exotic places inhabited by people who are ‘different’ (from us) in peculiar, even fantastical ways – places which ‘we’ from this part of the world are free to access and alter.”²⁰³ Heron elaborates on some critical points on ‘othering’ and further cemented previous arguments on entitlement. Essentially, we decide, through what mechanism it is unclear, that we *deserve* as foreigners to enter foreign cultures and have access to alter their daily lives, simply because we can afford it and it is all under the name of ‘doing good’. It is almost as though it is some sort of rite of passage or duty. Once it becomes this exotic altruistic endeavor, the crowd it aims to please has been hooked, yet possibly with false misconceptions.

The Projects Abroad video interview exemplifies how we further frame these spaces as places we can come into, but also ones that are inhabited by people who are ‘different’. In the interview with Scarborough, he explains a five-day orientation that students on the gap year program participate in upon their arrival to Ghana. Of this orientation he says that you “learn basically what Africa is actually like and what is so different about it from your own country – you haven’t been to a country like it before. It’s like learning a new language.” Besides the gaping misconception that five days in Accra, Ghana can allow anyone to ‘learn basically what Africa is actually like,’ Scarborough is continuing to make volunteering abroad, and his particular program, ‘fantastical’ with ‘different’ beings for us to observe. He is cementing the tourism piece of volunteer tourism and creating an othering process that distances the

voluntourist from being a benevolent helper. “It’s like learning a new language” he says, asserting that this coveted program that is being shown on the screen to be dominated by young white, mostly women, is in fact fundamentally different. Where it might very well be – his statement does exemplify how media and voluntourist organization narratives continue to find ways to ‘other’ people within host communities. Through this video example, we are being given access to the knowledge of this program, its cost, and the prevalence of whiteness in voluntourism as a subconscious, yet readable text. The process of ‘othering’ is concerning toward the volunteer tourism industry for it can alienate host communities.

Further Racial Tensions Inspired by Media

Media shows us only what helps get them (in whatever form is producing) what they want. What it inherently lacks is a careful understanding of the history of colonialism, development and tourism. Due to this, our media perception of both what is needed and what voluntourism is becomes completely skewed. As Heron explains "the media age in which we live in has the effect of increasing and escalating the Othering that has inhered in various kinds of representations over time, in part because the images received in the North come without historical analysis."²⁰⁴ In other words, the process of media representation of areas ‘needing development’ increases our process of ‘othering’ without reference to historical accuracy. Through our previous discussion of idealistic volunteers having the potential to create neo-colonialist modules within their host communities, this process of ‘othering’ is a further effect, usually contributed to via the media, which additionally complicates the voluntourism industry. The effect, then, becomes that our knowledge of these volunteer destinations is altered by misconceptions of what is actually happening in current times. These media representations and

crass generalizations are simultaneously failing to represent the misogynistic aspects of colonialism that affected the vast majority of all of these volunteer destinations, and how the remnants of oppression remain and complicate the voluntourism industry.

These concerns about host communities feeling the brunt of ‘othering’, power, entitlement and so on is exemplified in my interviews with informants. During another interview with Christian, he expressed his concern at this very prospect of a lack of historical or current understanding. “People think they can just come here and ‘save Africa,’” Christian exclaims, his arms raised above his head and waving around. He continues:

They appear to think white needs to save black Africa...The volunteers are shown one thing back home - and then get mad at us, at me, when Africa is not what they thought it would be like. Then they tell me “***I*** don’t understand’ and act like my country is just some crazy, alien planet. There is little to no understanding of how we came to be. Sure, they are not all like this. Some of us idolize them, but that’s backwards. But, what they do not understand is that white has already done enough. We are colonized, congrats. We do not need reminders nor your apologies or pity.²⁰⁵

Again, Christian adds “no offense, Akua” and lowers his hands. Christian spoke with clarity, emotion heavy within the air. His comment “white needs to save black Africa” precisely relates to the idea of white saviors coming into to Africa once again, on their own agendas, and fixing the problems. Christian’s point here clearly shows the effects that naïve voluntourism, both from volunteers, voluntourist organizations and the media, can have on the local community and their interpretations of the countries needs and its connection to racial and colonial tensions. Not only does this example of Christian’s feelings exemplify media misrepresentations and false ideas about what is needed in Ghana and what can be done, but it explores further the racial tensions within this paradox. A tension that is ultimately completely ignored by the media and advertisements, which is precisely Heron’s point regarding a lack of analysis and furthering the ‘othering’ in the process of development work. Additionally, several other of site supervisors and

one other Projects Abroad staff also cited some form of racial tension and a discomfort with how Africa appeared to have been perceived. Where volunteers may claim to be helping, the naivety that some (or many) have could potentially harm the host communities, at least in terms of tensions within already strained relationships.

In a formal setting with Sahara, I inquired how she felt perceived by Ghanaians as a black female in a white female dominated role. In the process of explaining her invisibility and the confusion her place held for locals, Sahara mentioned that by challenging the norm of who volunteers usually are she found that the locals, who looked like her, could not always decide whether she was trustworthy, or if she too would “act with entitlement.”²⁰⁶ She went on to explain that she believed that because of the colonial past of Ghana she sensed that Ghanaians were skeptical of the expectations of volunteers to ‘make a difference’. “Whites have already changed their country once and despite Ghanaians being positive beings and screaming out ‘obruni’ I think many are more uncomfortable with the color of your skin than they act,” suggests Sahara. Sahara’s words hit strongly, but in many ways what she says resonates with me. I think of Christian’s hesitance to be open with me and feel instantly that much of it has to do with the color of my skin.

In balancing both Christian’s claims of whites seeing a need to save Africa, and Sahara’s observation of racial tensions and perhaps our desire to ‘do good’ while we volunteer, we must come to understand more the motivations and expectations of the volunteers. For although we can understand perhaps, through media and socioeconomics so far, why whiteness - and in part why white females are so prevalent - we have not yet explored far enough the expectations of the volunteer. Based off my own experiences and my interviews I believe the disconnect in expectation and the levels of respect is where much of the racial tensions lie.

As is evident in the literature and opinions of those in the host communities, there are racial tensions. Now we must ask, what are volunteers expecting out of their participation? How do media, socioeconomic, racial and imperialist factors complicate tensions between white volunteers and the local community? Are volunteers cognizant of the racial concerns?

Emily, a seventeen year old (white) volunteer from Ohio, explains to me that she “expected dirt roads, shacks, sadness and poverty everywhere,” but that she did not expect to see “this level of competence and prosperity.”²⁰⁷ Before arriving Emily had a picture in her mind of what Ghana was going to resemble. Though there are dirt roads, shacks and poverty in Ghana, it is not what many come to observe once they arrive. Of her placement at Trust Hospital, she said she felt “angry with Projects Abroad for making it seem like [she] could do real medical work and that [she] would be really needed and useful. I wanted to help!” Emily was not the only person to bring up in some form a disappointment or feeling of disconnect between their expectation and the reality; nor was she the only volunteer to feel entitled to medical work – but we have already discussed as such. In fact, only one volunteer did not mention in some form that they had been surprised by the lack of help needed or were disappointed in that they could not do more. This relates directly back to Christian’s points about how, generally white women, who can afford to and who see it is popular, then want to feel or be needed and even feel justified in helping what they seem to perceive as the ‘needy other’. Yet, again these perceptions and expectations (if acted on) perpetuate the tensions between white saving black further complicating this industry.

In Wanda Vradi’s doctorate dissertation, she writes briefly about the phenomenon Emily experienced of not being needed, specifically about Ghana and Projects Abroad as well. Vradi explains that volunteer’s images and, perhaps hope, of what would be needed by Ghana changed

drastically after arriving. She commented that they wanted a meaningful volunteer experience where they could perform service projects that were exciting and different.²⁰⁸ “Once ‘in the field’, however,” writes Vrasti, “volunteers are often *forced* to take a vacation (travel, read, hang out in expat bars) because they lack the necessary skills or institutional framework to perform a meaningful social function abroad.”²⁰⁹ Namely, publicity and media representations of what was needed in Ghana – or in development and voluntourism in general – does not come close to matching the actual needs of society. As discussed earlier these lack of skills and qualifications can be reasons toward a lack of data on benefits toward host communities. It seems that the majority of the benefit may in fact be very closely tied to the volunteer, rather than being a parallel benefit. Although important for the volunteer to educate themselves, the publicity, from organizations themselves and elsewhere, is responsible for perhaps hyperbole or even falsifying the need within these countries and the nature of their destitution as well, which is often exaggerated comparatively. Volunteers then arrive unqualified and become disappointed when they cannot be useful to programs they have no skills in. If they act on their disappointment, which many, as customers, do chose to do, it can further impact racial concerns within the country.

This idea that we have mentioned before, in consumerism and entitlement, is equally as important in looking at theories of racial concerns. Namely, where did the idea that Emily would be ‘really needed’ and able to do ‘real medical work’ come from? I believe it is more than simply entitlement but is racially and media motivated as well. As Heron suggests, “embedded in the discourse inviting us to know the world and our place in it in these ways is the message that Northern countries have a special role to play in alleviating the woes of poor global Others.”²¹⁰ Saliently, Heron argues that the same media that tells us to know our place in our world, also

marginalizes the capacity of the developing world and makes it appear in much more need than it actually is of amelioration and assistance. Not only that, but the discourse creates a message that we have a role or a right, despite not necessarily being qualified (or at least not discussing a need for cognizance of skills or what can be done). By Emily feeling as though she was disappointed in the lack of ability for her to change the world, she too is embedded in the discourse that she had a special role to help 'save' Ghana, despite a lack of knowledge or understanding. Yet, clearly she, and many others alike did not understand what Ghana was in need of. Her entitlement mantra in many ways further develops not only the neo-colonial models we have discussed but a 'white savior' mentality that only whites can save Africa.

Profiles of Ghana and other 'developing' countries in publicity and media tend to be shown as being in extreme poverty and receptive to 'help'. If you do a Google image search of Ghana and scroll past the maps, the majority of the pictures are snapshots of volunteers in classrooms with Ghanaian children or volunteers dressed in lab coats, or the occasional picture of the destitute fishing village or a hut community. When you read the descriptions for projects on websites, they are often misleading as to what you will actually be doing. For Ghana's medical program it says, "interns chose to spend their time between working in accidents and emergencies, pediatrics, maternity, pharmacy, physical therapy, and surgery,"²¹¹ it goes on to promise that "you will deal with obscure and different diseases such as malaria and typhoid fever."²¹² Though the site never explicitly states that volunteers (interns) will be performing surgeries or will be 'truly needed' the subtle tone is exotic diseases and lots for you do in this medical field. There is no mention of skill level, and again no recognition of the competency of these hospitals already. From here, we have volunteers responding to this media image and coming in with false misconceptions.

As we have seen the media can grossly overstate an issue, such has been seen with the ethically concerning Kony 2012 sensation that brought about the most viral video in history, raised millions of dollars and yet, to what effect? Not only did the Kony 2012 phenomena create false understandings of the situation in Uganda it perpetuated the images of white saviors and Africa being unable to fend for itself. Although Kony 2012 in itself could most likely have an entire thesis dedicated to its concerns, I use this example to further illustrate the connection between media and white saviors, which is then supported and *justified* through these volunteer organizations. Though Projects Abroad will tell you that you will not ‘change the world’ what they do not say is (if white) ‘be cautious of your privilege and of coming across as a white savior for that will create tensions in your relationships with locals,’. The lack of these conversations on race, othering and white savior complex, both on behalf of the volunteers and among media representations (global and from organizations) is potentially very harmful for the host communities that these programs are claiming to help.

“I wanted to save lives in the hospitals,” added Emily, who is not even a senior in high school, “but instead, I just watched people do that.” She finishes with a sigh and slumps her shoulders, as though defeated by a system that tricked her. Where Projects Abroad may have exaggerated what was needed, as well as other media forms on Ghana, where does the thought that anyone at seventeen can be saving lives in hospitals? I do not know any seventeen year old that is qualified to perform health care to the level of ‘saving lives’ in the United States, what makes Ghana or any other place any different? The misconceptions of (many) volunteers in being able to perform meaningful projects that are in dire need of being completed, coupled with what seems to be a deep desire to ‘do good’ and feel needed, only increases racialized tensions within these programs. Though yes, much of it may come from being privileged and being

influenced heavily by media representations or false conceptions of what the volunteer experience holds – the expectations and understandings volunteers have coming in directly affects racial and cultural tensions. This is especially true within Ghana, as it has such a complex relationship to colonialism and development already.

Ghanaian culture uses local language and cultural conduct to make racial identities and differences heavily apparent. Screams of ‘obruni’, or other words for ‘white’ depending on your location, echo the streets you walk down as a foreigner. You are honked at, treated extremely differently, always given the best seat on the bus, the special attention and so on. In part there is an awe of white – seeing whites as an innovation and full of money,²¹³ and on the other hand there is a complicated feeling of being pressured to allow foreigners in, without necessarily an ability to help, simply because they can afford to – and then they happen to be white – the color of their former colonizers. As Vraști states, “what Ghanaians effectively [are] doing by calling white bodies ‘white’ [is] to make this racial dynamic visible.”²¹⁴ Vraști discerns that this could potentially derive from a mode of protection of calling out color to assert “presence.” This protection could be from the lack of ability to decide on acceptance of the infiltrating nature of white volunteers almost appearing imperialistic in ways. Especially if they waltz in as Emily did with the expectation to be doing surgeries with no medical knowledge, but only because she thinks, based on media perceptions of altruism and black Africa, that the country is in such dire need it will be allowed and/or encouraged. Yet, if white is not the color of the volunteer, do these racial tensions still exist?

Sahara felt as though she was betwixt and between acceptance and the status of a ‘black obruni.’ Despite being originally alarmed at having ‘obruni’ attached to her name, knowing it meant white, she understood it to mean foreign, rather than ‘white savior’. Sahara’s presence

challenged the white savior notion. Many of her students would ask where she came from, if there were other black people in her country, if they were wealthy or poor, if they knew Obama – and other questions that seem obvious to us, but to a nine-year-old in Ghana was confusing and astounding. In addition to questions from students, Sahara told me that a local stopped her while she was with several white female volunteers and warned her to “not forget” that she was black. Though alarmed by his comment, she articulated that her experience in Ghana was shaded daily by her race and working alongside whites. Sahara broke the norm *and* she was cognizant of the colonial past and the concerns of paternalism, entitlement and other such problems embedded within the discourse of critiques for volunteer tourism. Yet, Sahara represents a small minority of those volunteering abroad, not only in her race, but in her understandings of the complications of her place in Ghana and volunteering.

Unfortunately, many white volunteers did not even notice the racial tensions. Mike, a 22-year old volunteer from Ireland, said “they like me because I’m white and have money. They don’t know me, but that’s all they know is I have money and they think I want to help so they tell me I can help by giving them money. There isn’t a lot of tension, we just laugh off them asking for money and joke with them until we have to leave.”²¹⁵ Mike’s statement (which filled me with great unease) is an example of how volunteers who are naïve of the racial tensions that both Sahara and Christian pick up on, can not only be oblivious, but also be ‘othering’ and elitist in their observations. In Mike saying ‘there isn’t a lot of tension’ he is not only undermining a history of colonization by the British (read: white) in Ghana, but is further ignoring the racial visibility that Vrasti discusses that is in part, arguably there to make the differences readily apparent. The Projects Abroad booklets warn against people asking for money and state that you will be “recognized by Ghanaians for being white often. Just remember they are culturally

different than you!”²¹⁶ This additional ‘othering’ in the Projects Abroad handbook points at how volunteer organizations continue to sell their programs – by making it seem like a program where you are safe, protected but experiencing something new and exciting – while also potentially doing good. However, from ‘othering’ and making it appear as simple as Ghanaian’s just wanting money – or other simplified versions of racial tensions, volunteers continue to perpetuate a concerning, possibly neo-colonialist doctrine on the society they are volunteering in, while tending to deny or ignore the racial tensions all together. Unfortunately, these paradoxes are what increase tensions and decrease an ability for either Ghanaian’s or the white volunteers to have a fully mutualistic and positive experience.

The volunteer tourism focused media, paired with the conflicting expectations it provides and colonialist undertones is cause for a racially tense experience in Ghana, complicated by a strange majority of young, white females. Though racial tensions are certainly not the only aspect, as we have seen, of how voluntourism is potentially problematic, it does shed light on an important tension that certainly adds to the complexity of the voluntourism industry.

Understanding the white majority is important, because it sheds light on some of the falsehoods of what voluntourism is. Equally important is understanding how relationships between white volunteers and black Ghanaians can be stressed by the racialized tensions. Whether volunteers are attempting to ‘make up’ for past destruction by attempting to help, or are coming in with notions that they can ‘save Africa’, the result is a complex dynamic that deserved a specific lens into understanding its background. As Christian stated, ‘they’ do not need white to save black, but if they believe they are meant to do so, this can harm communities. Ultimately, whether or not volunteers intentions are pure, sometimes voluntourism misses the mark. Taking other

factors out, with race alone involved, tensions are sure to erupt and complex relationships will develop.

Society, through media, and moral high ground passed down to us, manipulates our understanding of the world its complexities. As we have seen, through media, we see what the media wants us to see *and* what we want to see. Publicity for these organizations offers little explanation of what actually needs to be done in the country, but applies to the senses of what they know their audience wants to observe. Potential volunteers seem to not want to accept remnants of oppression or even see their roles as oppressive. They do not want to hear that the location they have chosen, because of its' exotic nature, is not actually in dire need of their assistance. Potential volunteers appear to want to feel needed, wanted and as though they are doing a good thing for the world. It seems that volunteers want to see people in need, through media representations, so they can justify their trips, yet are not comprehending the ability for this to be seen or experienced as a continuation of the 'white savior' mantra that has harmed many communities. Unfortunately, because of history, race will likely always present challenges within the voluntourism industry. Yet, despite this concern, and the many others discussed throughout this body of work, volunteer tourism continues. Now, we must ask - to what effect can these challenges be reconciled?

Further Conclusions: Why Volunteer at All?

Songs of more than a hundred school children fill the hot, humid air as the group of kids surround me in the courtyard. Tears run down my face as I receive a bag full of letters from one of my oldest classrooms. Some of the students in the classroom I have known for several years and have witnessed their growth. It is my last day at The Coming King, a school I have worked

at for four years throughout my many trips. Teachers who I have cultivated relationships with scrawl down phone numbers and Facebook names to stay in touch. The older students understand that this may be the last time I see them, as they are graduating and at the time I do not know when I will be back.

One of my student's letters has several hearts and flowers on it sketched on the lined paper. She runs up to me, tears running down her face. "Read my letter!" she demands of me. I open the letter and read:

Dear Auntie Jessye, I will miss you very much. I wish you were not leaving but that is [the] truth. You have taught me so much about your culture and I loved teaching you how to cook banku and stew. I will never forget you. Thanks for helping me with my studies. For all your art projects and for helping me believe in myself and not feel like a fool. I will miss you very much. I love you very much. Please do not forget me or I will be very sad.

Always and forever,

Your student – Pearl (Class 4).²¹⁷

Pearl's letter ends with a heart scrawled next to her signature. This is one of many letters I received. As I read the letters from the students and teachers I have come to know and love, I am reminded that despite spending this past summer interviewing and researching for a thesis that is critical of this voluntourism industry, the love I have felt for those I have connected with here is real, as are the relationships I have cultivated. Though I have often been critical, yet still intrigued by work in Ghana, I believe this note, as well as numerous other examples I have from my own experiences, show there is real potential for there to be a positive impact, not just on volunteers but on host communities as well. This is not to say that my programs have been without ethical concerns, because they have not, but I use this example to exemplify the reality that despite challenges, there is potential for 'good,' not just in my own projects – but for anyone. Though I have often debated the legitimacy of my own actions abroad, while being simultaneously critical of other volunteers positions and impact within their host communities,

there is validity in mutual positive benefits that could potentially reconcile with the potential for harm.

This thesis began with a question regarding the ethical concerns of voluntourism. As demonstrated throughout this body of work there are many concerns embedded in the discussion of volunteer tourism, as well as a sampling of potential benefits for both volunteer and host communities. There is the potential for harm, even with well-meaning volunteers whose motives are pure in purpose. First, I explored historical frameworks of both tourism and voluntourism, while exploring preliminary concerns of the industry. Next, I analyzed the potential for harm rather than good within self-interested motives. Building upon these motives I unpacked reasons why I believed altruism was not a part of voluntourism, while providing an analysis of the consumerist aspect of voluntourism, coupled with attitudes of entitlement. Following this discussing I focused on the power structures, inequalities and potential for neo-colonial claims against voluntourism. Lastly, I discussed racial tensions and majorities, as well as the media's process of othering.

The overall concern through this body of work has been that volunteers can negatively impact communities in harmful ways that strongly outweigh the benefits. As we have seen this could be through motives, attitudes, paternalism, power structures, created dependency or lack of continuity. Yet, despite these concerns there still has been no clear argument as to whether or not volunteering abroad should ethically continue in spite of potential for harm. Now I aim to conclude that despite such ethical complexities, and the rhetoric and data that supports such concerns, there *is* space to create voluntourism programs that are consistently beneficial toward both the server and the served.

How can these challenges be reconciled? There are three main aspects that literature seems to cite as the potential *mutual* benefits of volunteer service: 1) cross-cultural understanding and positive, meaningful relationships 2) language skills and 3) impacts on communities in a positive way. On the side of the volunteer, there is the potential for an additional benefit of global citizenry and personal development. On the side of the host communities there is also the potential for economic gain, cultural capital increase and for volunteers to utilize their knowledge toward educating those back in their own communities. Clearly, there is potential for benefit on both sides of this equation, yet many times there is more negativity or naivety in relation to voluntourism.

Based on the ethical concerns and the forms of potential benefit, I suggest that if volunteers are: 1) cautious of their privilege and power within host communities, 2) cognizant of race relations and 3) challenge themselves to understand what the host communities actually need and want, (rather than following their own instincts) that there could be room for potential benefit to outweigh harm. If volunteers were cautious of their privilege and power, while also being cognizant of race relations, though still always a complication within these relationships, the tensions could significantly decrease. Even if a majority of volunteers were simply aware of the ethical concerns there could be an improvement in cross-cultural understandings and meaningful relationships. If volunteers challenged themselves to understand the culture first, before imposing their own views, and listened to what communities needed and wanted, there could be potential for positive impacts on communities. Additionally, notions of entitlement would need to be left out of the potential package for beneficial volunteering as it can only cause discontent on either side.

As outsiders, volunteers should have an obligation to be conscious of the negative impact they could have, but all too often there is little discussion as such amongst most volunteers. Ultimately, on behalf of the volunteers, I infer that there is potential for good, *if* volunteers are cautious, aware, and understanding of their role and of potential for harm as well as good. Though these attributes do not completely negate concerns or tensions, it could significantly increase potential for benefit. Unfortunately, as we have seen, these commandments for respect, relativity and understanding do not always happen amongst volunteer and host community relationships. However, based on my own experiences, this research and experiences of others I have witnessed, I do believe that these attributes to aspire to for volunteers could significantly improve the tensions within this ethically complex industry.

As Joeshmail, a Ghanaian schoolteacher and close friend of mine said to me: “the more understanding one has, and the less expectation they arrive with, the greater the possibility of helping both us and themselves.”²¹⁸ Notably, Joeshmail, in one simple sentence provides a map toward how voluntourists can truly make the difference they claim to desire to have, while also receiving the benefit they desire. As voluntourism continues to proliferate across the globe, hopefully there will be a parallel growth in volunteer consciousness, which would allow the voluntourism industry to significantly increase its potential toward mutual benefit between volunteer and host community.

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- ¹⁸⁸ These fees, although accurately representing the majority of organizations, do not mean that each person that volunteers can afford to. Many people fundraise the funds if they cannot afford it, and others receive grants from outside sources. However, it does illuminate the inability for 'just anyone to go'.
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- ¹⁹⁰ Personal Interview 2 of 2 with subject SS1 'Joshabell' on July 27th, 2012.
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- ¹⁹⁶ Personal Interview with subject V4 'Daniel' July 20th, 2012
- ¹⁹⁷ Personal Interview with subject IS1 'Tammi.' September 12th, 2012.
- ¹⁹⁸ Vrsti, W. (2011). *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times*. New York. Routledge. 86
- ¹⁹⁹ Projects Abroad: Ghana. (2013). Retrieved March 28th, 2013 from Projects Abroad website: <http://www.projects-abroad.org/ghana/placements>
- ²⁰⁰ General observation, but also in looking at anyone's Facebook who has been abroad to volunteer, in a quick Google search of volunteer abroad blogs – many of them have similar pictures – in the BrandeisNOW, Justice and Hoot articles – all of them have a similar picture.

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- ²⁰⁷ Personal Interview with subject V8 'Emily' on July 10th, 2012.
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- ²¹⁴ Vradi, W. (2011). 110.
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- ²¹⁷ Personal Letter from friend on August 6th, 2012.
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