

WHITENESS ON MISSION (TRIPS):
ANALYZING VOLUNTOURISM AS A RACIAL PROJECT

by

EMILY HUNT

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Approved: Lesley Jo Weaver, PhD
Primary Thesis Advisor

Research increasingly takes a critical approach to voluntourism, but short-term Christian mission trips remain understudied, despite the fact that they represent a large share of the industry. Similarly understudied is the expression and reproduction of racial ideology in voluntourism and the positioning of volunteer tourists within systems of domination like white supremacy, neoliberalism, and neocolonialism. Utilizing post-colonialism and whiteness studies as my theoretical framework, I look at the intersection of whiteness and mission trips and ask: How do young white Christian mission trip participants express and reproduce racial and colonial logics? What motivates them to participate? What opportunities, if any, do mission trips offer for individual and collective resistance to systems of domination? What alternative models might interrupt harm?

Drawing on Sylvia Wynter's framework of the 'We'/'West' centered as the norm *through* the production of the 'Other'/'non-West,' I pursue a critical exploratory analysis of the racialized underpinning of mission trips. Research data consists of 33 semi-structured interviews with people who participated in mission trips, along with a literature review. Utilizing grounded theory for a narrative/thematic data analysis, I

uncover participant motivations with significant ties to racial and colonial projects, as well as Christian institutions. In addition, I explore ten themes linking mission trips to domination and dehumanization. Participant resistance to such dominance mostly operated post-trip to question and critique missional oppression. I conclude with a brief exploration of alternatives, although insist that an alternative is not necessary to cease the practice. Future research stands to engage deeper and necessary issues in mission trips and voluntourism such as the role of institutions in perpetuating volunteer motivation, differences in practice across religious denominations, and host community resistance and resilience to Western volunteer tourists.

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Introduction

The phrase “mission trip” calls any number of images to one’s mind: a dozen white teenagers, all in matching t-shirts, sitting together at the airport; a young white woman with her arms around a group of brown-skinned children from another country; a small house built by volunteers without any construction experience. Mission trips occupy a rather controversial space in public discourse. Some emphasize virtue while others emphasize violence. Yet for all the quintessential images and public controversy, mission trips are understudied, often tenuously folded into research on volunteer tourism (voluntourism).

The objective of this study is to uncover the largely unspoken and under-analyzed racial and colonial underpinnings of volunteer tourism, focusing on the sub-type of voluntourism: mission trips. From the self-reflections of individual mission trip participants, multiple years after participation, this research aims to contribute to understandings of how whiteness functions in the U.S. and abroad, especially in Protestant Christian settings. Its goal is to serve, in some small way, centuries-long efforts to deconstruct and dismantle white supremacy.

This thesis is organized into four main chapters. Chapter one explores mission trip participants’ motivations, especially those that relate to Protestant Christian institutions and theology and/or those that intersect with sociohistorical systems. I argue that participant motivations for attending mission trips are intertwined with Christian imperialism, domestic racial projects, and racialized conceptions of the third world ‘other.’ The second chapter contains the most results and explores how mission trips reproduce systems of domination, specifically racial and colonial systems. The third

chapter explores how participants and mission trips can resist such domination. The second and third chapters support the argument that mission trips are a racist racial project, under the definition of Omi and Winant, in that they reproduce structures of domination while resistance to such reproduction proved limited, mostly occurring through participants' post-hoc reflection on their involvement in the mission trip industry. Finally, chapter four operates as both a conclusion and briefly explores four alternatives to the traditional mission trip model.

Author Positionality

My participation in mission trips affects my perspective and analysis, as does my positionality as a white cisgender woman (she/her) from a wealthy Christian family who grew up in a predominately white Portland suburb. In 2014, the summer after my freshman year in high school, I took part in my first short-term mission trip: traveling with a team from my church in West Linn, Oregon to Managua, Nicaragua. In 2015, I went on my second mission trip to San Francisco—more specifically the Tenderloin District. In 2016, I went on my third mission trip to Tijuana, Mexico. That same summer, I organized a five-week solo mission trip to a ministry in Azacualpa, Honduras. ‘Mission work’ in high school was central to my identity and Christian faith. At the time, I had strong convictions about the utility and ethics of my participation.

I pursue reflexivity in my research—both identifying my positionality and critically engaging with the way it impacts my analysis. Reflexivity calls for researchers to examine our relationship to social hierarchies and how they shape our relationship

with the people and subjects we study.¹ Wendy Leo Moore argues that reflexivity must assess power dynamics and contextualize them within systems of racism in the U.S. and academy. But Moore discloses that “this kind of reflexivity is difficult and challenging, particularly because we are immersed within the very context we wish to critically assess.”² I reflect on my position as (1) a white researcher with (2) extensive experience going on mission trips while (3) actively participating in Christianity.

As a white researcher, I occupy a similar social position with my interviewees in terms of how racial systems categorize our phenotypical (and other) cues. I have first-hand experience being ‘white’ in U.S. society and abroad. I am also familiar with the process of critical learning about systemic racism that some white people navigate—a process that often takes place in a classroom setting, as mine did, over four years of college. My position as a white researcher from a suburb of Portland, Oregon does not allow me familiarity with the experience of communities who host volunteer tourists and who are racialized as non-white or non-Western. My perspective (and my research design) therefore cannot elucidate the experience of host communities or the experience of non-white mission trip participants.

My experience on mission trips provided me with the networks that I utilized for interviews and, in some ways, made this project possible. However, through this project, my participation in the voluntourism industry continues to enhance my profits in the neoliberal global economy (i.e. this research project is the final requirement for my undergraduate degree) and economic profits are characteristic of many voluntourist

¹ Wendy Leo Moore, “Reflexivity, Power, and Systemic Racism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 4 (April 2012): 615.

² Moore “Reflexivity,” 618-619.

ventures.³ Inspired by Barbara Heron in her book: *Desire for Development: Whiteness, Gender, and the Helping Imperative*, I use collective language when possible like ‘we’ or ‘us’ to talk about mission trip participants, because I include myself in the population. As Heron says, this operates “to place myself within the analysis and to signal that I see myself implicated in the issues I raise in respect to relations of domination.”⁴ She admits to the complications of being both researcher and participant, but holds to the importance of not dichotomizing whiteness into more moral and less.⁵ I aim to implicate myself in the analysis I conduct—understanding that just because one claims status as ‘researcher,’ does not erase one’s participation.

My experience with Christian community, theology, and culture enabled a better understanding of my interview participants’ perspectives and especially language. Christian language is a world of its own. Phrases like ‘altar call,’ ‘the great commission,’ and ‘called’ all have specific meanings in Christian (especially evangelical) circles. Because I aim to analyze the impact of religion on mission trips (as religion distinguishes mission trips from other forms of short-term voluntourism), familiarity proved helpful. I also found that when interviewees realized I was an ‘insider,’ both through my identification with Christianity and my past participation in mission trips, they were willing to speak more openly about their experiences. I believe my previous and ongoing involvement in Christianity afforded me access to more transparent sharing/storytelling from interviewees.

³ Wanda Vrasti, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 95.

⁴ Barbara Heron, *Desire for Development: Whiteness, Gender, and the Helping Imperative* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 18.

⁵ Heron, *Desire for Development*, 19.

Research Design and Methodology

Purpose of the Study

I aim to study the function of whiteness and religion in short-term Christian mission trips—a sector of voluntourism historically overlooked by researchers. I specifically inquire about the expression and reproduction of racial logics by young white volunteers using the theoretical frameworks of critical theory, whiteness studies, and post-colonialism. The following research questions guided my methodology: In what ways can mission trips be theorized as a racial project? What motivates young white people to join mission trips? What opportunities do mission trips offer for personal and communal resistance to injustice? What alternative models might effectively redirect the energy and resources allocated for mission trips? As my research focused on the white mission trip participant, I pursued one-on-one interviews with white people who participated in at least one short-term mission trip. I do not purport to study the full impact of voluntourism as experienced by host communities because host communities' perspectives are not included in my research design.

Data Collection

For my primary data collection, I employed a qualitative phenomenological research method, seeking to hear, understand, and explore the lived experiences of white mission trip participants through their spoken narratives and reflections.⁶ I sought interviewees from my networks built through previous mission trips, and then employed a snowball sampling approach to expand my pool beyond those with whom I had/have a

⁶ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (California: SAGE Publications, 2018).

personal relationship. I allotted an hour for each interview. Some interviews went over time by as much as thirty minutes, while some wrapped up as quickly as thirty-five minutes, but the majority lasted the full hour. All interviews were virtual (over Zoom or FaceTime) due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the locations of participants. I gained IRB exempt status for this project and utilized a verbal consent process emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation, interviewees' freedom to turn down questions or end the interview at any point, and providing information about my research topic and host institution as well as guidance on potential risks. The risks I outlined were limited to emotional risks, with the most likely being discomfort. I informed participants that they could share about any discomfort they experienced during the interview, but no one did. All participants gave verbal consent to proceed as well as to have the audio of their interview recorded.

The interviews were semi-structured. I utilized a list of nineteen interview questions (included in Appendix A). The last question invited participants to recommend other interview questions or share any information they deemed relevant. Throughout interviews, I asked clarifying and follow-up questions and generally encouraged participants to speak on what they found significant, applicable, or interesting.

Participant Demographics

In total, I interviewed 33 people: 23 female-identifying people and 10 male-identifying people. Except for two, all identified as 'white' or 'Caucasian.' Two participants identified as biracial or multiracial. Most participants were in their late teens or early twenties. Four participants were notably older than the rest of the pool

and all had extensive experience participating in, but more importantly leading, mission trips. Out of the 33 participants, I had a personal connection with 20. I refer to all interview participants using pseudonyms.

Multiple factors guided the make-up of the final interview pool. I reached out to friends and acquaintances from my hometown who I knew participated in missions and identified as white (the vast majority of both my youth group and mission teams were white, so this didn't prove restrictive). I received positive responses from about 85% of the people to whom I reached out. Following my snowball sampling method, I asked each person to recommend other people for me to interview. After obtaining permission, participants sent me contact information for their recommendation. I didn't explicitly note to participants that I sought white interviewees, although I believe it was implied through the description of my research in the consent process. By the twenty-third interview, I had only interviewed one male-identifying person. Thus, I intentionally sought out interviews with male-identifying people near the end to balance out my data.

With the exception of one participant, every person described themselves as Christian. Moreover, all but three described their religious beliefs as somewhere between important and very important. The participant who did not identify as Christian still emphasized the cultural impact of being raised in a Christian family. The two participants who described their faith as less important talked about the significance of their faith waning in the preceding couple of years.

Collectively, participants went on about 179 mission trips.⁷ However, this number is skewed by one participant who traveled to Mexico about 20 times and another who traveled to Mexico about 40 times. Mexico was by far the most popular destination. 28 of the trips were within the United States including ones to San Francisco, Las Vegas, Alaska, New Orleans, and Salt Lake. Six trips visited Native American Reservations. Outside U.S. borders, participants traveled on missions to South Africa, Poland, Guatemala, Cambodia, Kenya, Nicaragua, Uganda, Haiti, Tanzania, The Philippines, Brazil, Indonesia, Malawi, India, Peru, Costa Rica, Thailand, Romania, the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, and eSwatini (formerly called Swaziland).

Data Analysis

I approached data analysis using a modified grounded theory approach—working to generate qualitative results through a narrative/thematic analysis that did not impose a priori codes, but rather allowed them to emerge from the data. I also utilized theoretical memos to note evolving ideas and theory.⁸ Themes were identified both through their presence and repetition, and through their repeated absence in the data. Some themes were theory-driven—distinguishable to me because of prior research I had done. To ground my analysis as closely as possible to participants' experiences, I named themes with 'in vivo' phrases (using participants' language to refer to an idea) whenever possible.⁹

⁷ Some people could not recall the exact number of mission trips they had participated in.

⁸ Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, "Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria," *Qualitative Sociology* 13, no. 1 (1990).

⁹ Gery W Ryan and H Russell Bernard, "Techniques to Identify Themes," *Field Methods* 15, no. 1 (February 2003).

My data analysis occurred in three stages: interviewing, transcribing, and coding. During interviews, I wrote down words or phrases that stood out to me from participants' narratives. I then utilized transcription software, but went through each transcription to check for accuracy—during which I compiled an extensive list of emerging themes. Combined with interview notes, I utilized pile sorting to organize emerging themes into five main categories.¹⁰ I coded my data with Dedoose qualitative analysis software, using 65 thematic codes in the five categories. I then combined themes and eliminated those which proved negligible due to limited occurrence. I further pared down my results based on relevance to my research questions and logistical constraints of the project. For reporting, rather than separate reporting and analysis into two sections, I organize results thematically into four chapters.

Research Design Limitations and Reflections

I did not think to collect data about which specific denominations of Christianity interviewees subscribed to. Rather, I asked only if they identified as Christian, and the degree of importance religion held in their life. Doctrine, traditions, and politics vary dramatically between Protestant Christian denominations in the United States. Without data about specific denominations, I can only advance broader conclusions about Protestant Christians generally, and about churches that participate in mission trips. Future research could address how different Protestant Christian denominations conceptualize and organize mission trips differently, and how participants from different denominations experience these trips.

¹⁰ Ryan and Bernard, "Techniques," 94-95.

While not a limitation, it is worth underscoring that this study, like so many studies on voluntourism, excludes the perspectives of host communities. Relying on only the narratives and perspectives of volunteers limits results to those that center volunteers' actions/attitudes. Along with the practical complications of including the perspectives of host communities under COVID-19, I hesitated to enter host communities to extract data—in some ways, imitating the dynamics I critique in this study. Tuck and Yang's article “Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research” teaches a practice of refusing to mine for knowledge among “Native, urban, poor, and Othered communities,”¹¹ but rather encourage an interrogation of power, especially in institutions, tracing “the legacies and enactments of settler colonialism in everyday life.”¹² In this way, I attempt to interrogate identities that confer power (whiteness) and structures of power (like Protestant Christian churches), rather than voyaging to host communities. That said, research on voluntourism has been calling for host communities’ perspectives for more than a decade, and I advance that call once again.

While researching, I experienced a tension between participants’ contextualization of their experiences on mission trips as moments of discovery and beauty and my research which contextualizes mission trips in systems of violence and domination. As Martha Rose Beard explains, researchers bring specific knowledge and concerns to testimonies, and therefore it proves difficult to have a “shared authority...because interpretative conclusions invariably conflict with the intentions of

¹¹ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 20, no. 6 (July 2014): 813.

¹² Tuck and Yang, “Unbecoming Claims,” 814.

the narrator.”¹³ Beard also talks about how the meanings narrators construct are impacted by the time of the interview and guesses of what the interviewer might be looking for.¹⁴ Therefore, I consider that a key tension in my research is the discrepancy between the intentions of most participants and the conclusions I explore in my analysis. I also remember Tuck and Yang’s assertion that research conclusions “come out of the lived lives of real people we have met along the way: their stories, their worries and desires, their sense of the way the world works. This last part is too easy to disregard or forget.”¹⁵ I honor the real people who offered their stories and understandings for the existence of this research project.

¹³ Martha Rose Beard, “Re-Thinking Oral History – a Study of Narrative Performance,” *Rethinking History* 21, no. 4 (October 2017): 532.

¹⁴ Beard, “Re-thinking Oral History,” 542.

¹⁵ Tuck and Yang, “Unbecoming Claims,” 814.

Literature Review

The Voluntourism Industry

Every year, an estimated 1.6 million people participate in voluntourism: a way of travel that combines tourism and volunteering. Since the 1990s, voluntourism has grown significantly in popularity.¹⁶ The first global review of the voluntourism industry from 2008, valued it at between 1.66 billion and 2.6 billion.¹⁷ However, there is reason to believe that both the number of voluntourists and the value of the industry have grown exponentially since 2008. Two prominent scholars of voluntourism, Wearing and McGehee, report that a Google search of “volunteer tourism” on April 17, 2008, returned 230,000 hits, while on April 17, 2012, the same search returned 4,850,000 hits.¹⁸ On April 17, 2021, my own Google search of the same phrase Wearing and McGehee used (“volunteer tourism”) yielded 170,000,000 results. That’s a 3500% increase in Internet content over just nine years. Voluntourism is a rapidly growing trend, and scholarship reflects that with an expanding body of work on the subject.

Research on volunteer tourism began at the turn of the century with most scholars applauding its merits, but after a decade, research took a more critical approach. In their review of voluntourism, Wearing and McGehee contend that research on volunteer tourism has followed four phases of study—similar to research on other tourism models: “advocacy, cautionary, adaptancy, and scientific platforms.” Initial research on voluntourism identified positive participant motivations like “altruism, self-

¹⁶ Stephen Wearing and Nancy Gard McGehee, “Volunteer Tourism: A Review,” *Tourism Management* 38 (October 2013): 120.

¹⁷ *Volunteer Tourism: A Global Analysis* (Barcelona: Tourism Research and Marketing, 2008).

¹⁸ Wearing and McGehee, “Volunteer Tourism,” 120.

development, giving back to the host community, participating in community development, and cultural understanding.” The wave of criticism that followed drew a connection between colonialism and voluntourism, cautioned against dependency, and warned of exploitation. Moving from cautionary to adaptancy, researchers sought alternative ways to do volunteer tourism that might mitigate harm. Finally, research is moving toward the scientific platform which calls for “the utilization of structured, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, transnational, and mixed method approaches to examine volunteer tourism in a more systematic and logical way.”¹⁹ My research aims to embrace this fourth phase of analysis.

Wearing and McGehee discuss four main categories of scholarship on voluntourism. The first, and arguably most extensive, is scholarship looking at pre-trip volunteer motivations. The second investigates voluntourist organizations and their role in developing and facilitating voluntourism experiences. Because organizations are driven by consumer (volunteer) demands, they can lack accountability to host community needs/demands. However, as the bridge between volunteers and voluntourist experiences, organizations are positioned to potentially transform the voluntourism industry towards equitable, anti-colonial, and just practices. The third type of study centers host communities and their experiences. There are significantly fewer studies that center host communities compared to those that center volunteers, due to lack of definition around who is ‘hosting’ and language, cultural, and economic barriers. Finally, the fourth field explores post-trip volunteer transformations, like those towards greater social understanding, open attitudes, and even increased artistic interest.

¹⁹ Wearing and McGehee, “Volunteer Tourism,” 122.

While Wearing and McGehee's review of scholarship on voluntourism is comprehensive, there is a glaring absence of intersectional scholarship. This could be because the small body of literature intersecting voluntourism with social, economic, and political systems (explored in-depth later) mostly emerged after they published in 2013.²⁰

Research on voluntourism has fixated on voluntourists' motivations, especially on the altruism vs. egotism debate. Han, Soyeun, and Sunghyup in their article "Tourism and Altruistic Intention: Volunteer Tourism Development and Self-Interested Value" create a framework to *measure* altruism in voluntourists.²¹ However, they fail to problematize the desirability of the voluntourism industry, assuming that "volunteer tourism is seen as an important altruistic tourism form that provides novel pro-social experiences for the participants, contributes to the sustainable development of local communities, and requires travelers to inhibit egoistic desires."²² Their concern is not with voluntourism as an industry, therefore, but with the values, judgments, experiences, and resilience of voluntourists. They even go so far as to claim, "Indisputably, inducing individuals' altruistic tourism behaviors is one of the essential issues in the global volunteer tourism sector."²³ I dispute this claim. My research focuses on pressing questions about the voluntourism industry (specifically the mission trip industry) which don't revolve around the altruism vs. egotism debate. I aim to locate the volunteer within international systems of domination, not to pursue questions

²⁰ Wearing and McGehee, "Volunteer Tourism," 123-124.

²¹ Hessup Han, Soyeun Lee, and Sunghyup Sean Hyun, "Tourism and Altruistic Intention: Volunteer Tourism Development and Self-Interested Value," *Sustainability* 12, no. 5 (March 2020): 8.

²² Han, Lee, and Hyun, "Tourism and Altruistic Intention," 1.

²³ Han, Lee, and Hyun, "Tourism and Altruistic Intention," 10.

of altruism in the volunteer's motivational schema. In addition to the altruism vs. egotism debate, scholars identify an assortment of voluntourist motivating factors. Wearing and McGehee extrapolate dozens of motivations including cultural immersion/learning, making a difference, family bonding, experiencing something new/different, broaden one's mind, escape from everyday life, religious involvement, interacting with local people, building skills, relationship building, and traveling.²⁴

As researchers move toward more cautious analyses, Daniel Guttentag offers one of the first critical analyses examining the possible negative impacts of volunteer tourism on the global stage. He focuses on five areas based on a review of the literature: "neglect locals' desires, a hindering of work progress and completion of unsatisfactory work, a disruption of local economies, a reinforcement of conceptualizations of the 'other' and rationalisations of poverty, and an instigation of cultural changes."²⁵ His fourth category on reinforcing the 'other' and rationalizations of poverty especially pertains to my discussion.

Voluntourism is an umbrella term used for a variety of trips. Wearing defines voluntourists as "those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment."²⁶ Multi-year volunteer trips, like the Peace Corps, define one type of voluntourism. More common modes of voluntourism are short-term (one to two week) trips. Mission trips occupy a tenuous space within voluntourism. Guttentag

²⁴ Wearing and McGehee, "Volunteer Tourism," 123.

²⁵ Daniel A. Guttentag, "The Possible Negative Impacts of Volunteer Tourism," *International Journal of Tourism Research* 11 (November 2009): 537.

²⁶ Wearing and McGehee, "Volunteer Tourism," 120-121.

argues that mission trips that aren't solely focused on evangelism fall well within Wearing's definition of voluntourism.²⁷ Scholars such as Guttentag, Bandyopadhyay, and Patil, who offer some analysis of the role of religion and religious institutions in voluntourism, often cite McGehee and Andereck who claim that religion in voluntourism research is the "elephant in the living room" that no one wants to talk about.²⁸ Even with limited scholarship, there is evidence that mission trips make up a significant portion of the voluntourism industry. In a 2005 study in Honduras, 65% of voluntourists identified as primarily affiliated with a church or religious cause.²⁹ Later research estimated that up to 4 million Americans participate in a short-term mission trip every year³⁰ (which is more than the 2008 estimate for the entire voluntourism industry). Except for some work discussed in the next section, mission trips are rarely referenced in scholarship on voluntourism, and barely any research considers mission trips as a primary site of investigation.

Voluntourism's Intersection with Socio-Historical Systems

A small but growing body of scholarship intersects voluntourism with global socio-historical systems like religion, neoliberalism, development work, colonialism, neocolonialism, indigeneity, and race. A key scholar to my investigation, and one who intersects almost all of these with voluntourism, is sociocultural anthropologist Ranjan Bandyopadhyay. In a 2017 article, co-authored with Vrushali Patil, titled: "The white

²⁷ Guttentag, "The Possible Negative Impacts," 548.

²⁸ Ranjan Bandyopadhyay and Vrushali Patil, "'The White Woman's Burden' – the Racialized, Gendered Politics of Volunteer Tourism," *Tourism Geographies* 19, no. 4 (August 2017): 652; Guttentag, "The Possible Negative Impacts," 548.

²⁹ *Volunteer Tourism: A Global Analysis*, 33.

³⁰ Erin Flynn McKenna, "The Discourse of Deference and Its Impact on Tourist–Host Power Relations," *Journal of Travel Research* 55, no. 5 (May 2016): 556.

woman's burden' – the racialized, gendered politics of volunteer tourism," they analyze the meanings, practices, and policies of volunteer tourism as it relates to racialized, gendered, and colonial logic.³¹ This is the article that ultimately inspired this project, with its charge that research must examine the "emergence, growth, and popularity (with young white women in particular) from the perspective of historic and ongoing power relations having to do with race and racialized gender."³² In 2019, Bandyopadhyay published an article called "Volunteer tourism and 'The White Man's Burden': globalization of suffering, white savior complex, religion and modernity,"³³ bringing to the forefront again the intersectional power dynamics at play in voluntourism. In both articles, but especially in the 2019 article, Bandyopadhyay explores religion—an incredibly understudied dynamic in voluntourism. Bandyopadhyay uses the symbol and person of Mother Theresa to explore the institutional and individual effect of religion on voluntourism. He compellingly asks: "When will our enthrallment with legends like Mother Teresa and Christian white men and women 'helping' and 'saving' people in the Global South that glorifies white Christian supremacy come to an end, if at all?"³⁴ His scholarship serves to open an important new field of research on voluntourism and is foundational to my own. Lindsey Johnson also looks at religious voluntourism in her article: "Can Short-Term Mission Trips Reduce Prejudice?" Unfortunately, the article is largely speculative in examining if the 'contact hypothesis' applies to short-term mission trips, and thus if

³¹ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, "The White Woman's Burden," 646.

³² Bandyopadhyay and Patil, "The White Woman's Burden," 654.

³³ This article was published in shorter form in 2018 under the title "Volunteer tourism and religion: The cult of Mother Teresa" in *Annals of Tourism Research*, 70.

³⁴ Bandyopadhyay, "The White Man's Burden," 340.

trips could lead to decreased volunteer ‘prejudices.’³⁵ While seemingly proximate in content, Johnson’s article focuses on individualized bias and is not very helpful in trying to contextualize white Christian volunteers in *systems* of dominance.

Wanda Vrasti’s book *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times* is the only comprehensive work looking at the impacts of the neoliberal global economy on voluntourism, and vice versa. Combining primary data from research in Ghana and Guatemala with theory, Vrasti argues that voluntourism’s value is not in its ability to create social change, but its reproduction of the conditions necessary for the neoliberal economy.³⁶ While I don’t purport to analyze mission trips in relation to the neoliberal global economy, Vrasti’s work does provide critical framing and valuable comparative volunteer experiences, like racial dynamics and volunteer dissatisfaction.

A few key authors study voluntourism in relation to sociohistorical systems related to colonialism, indigeneity, and race. Fernández Repetto and Iser Burgos study a Mayan community in Ya’axnaj, Yucatán and their experience with ethnic and indigenous tourism in “Esencialización y espectacularización de lo maya. Turismo voluntario y étnico en una comunidad yucateca”/ “Essentialization and spectacularization of the Mayan. Volunteer tourism and ethnic tourism in a Yucatan community.” They argue that the tourism projects, run by Conservación y desarrollo A.C., work to essentialize and exoticize Mayan culture for volunteer consumption.³⁷

³⁵ Lindsey A. Johnson, “Can Short-Term Mission Trips Reduce Prejudice?” *The Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society* 4, no. 1 (2014): 14.

³⁶ Vrasti, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South*, 3-4.

³⁷ Francisco Fernández Repetto and Iser Estrada Burgos, “Esencialización y espectacularización de lo maya. Turismo voluntario y étnico en una comunidad Yucateca,” *Península* 9, no. 1 (January 2014): 10-11.

Matthew Schneider similarly looks at the exoticization of local culture, but rather than coming from a primarily postcolonial perspective, he takes a racial lens to examine how volunteers both exoticize local place and retreat to ‘white’ spaces whilst volunteering.³⁸

Barbara Heron’s book *Desire for Development: Whiteness, Gender and the Helping Imperative* is dedicated to the intersection of race and development work (which is proximate to voluntourism). Using primary data from interviews with white Canadian women development workers, Heron analyzes how participants make sense of their work in the development sector and conceptualize power relations.³⁹

Scholars aren’t the only ones taking issue with racial and colonial domination in voluntourism. Boniface Mwangi, a Kenyan activist, traveled throughout the U.S. on a lecture series urging young Americans to stop attempting to fix problems in other countries that grassroots activism is already working to solve, and instead focus on domestic issues—especially racial injustice.⁴⁰ Moreover, the organization “No White Saviors,” based in Kampala, Uganda, has a popular Instagram and podcast where they critique white saviorism, especially in the development sector and voluntourism industry.⁴¹ With social media playing an increasingly important role in information dissemination, No White Saviors’ education and advocacy offers an opportunity to shift the narrative around voluntourism (which is in fact already happening).

³⁸ Matthew Schneider, “Exotic Place, White Space: Racialized Volunteer Spaces in Honduras,” *Sociological Forum* 33, no. 3 (September 2018): 690.

³⁹ Heron, *Desire for Development*, 12.

⁴⁰ Leslie Gordon Goffe, “Taking on America’s ‘Voluntourism,’” *New African*, March 19, 2015, <https://newafricanmagazine.com/10297/>.

⁴¹ No White Saviors, Instagram account, <https://www.instagram.com/nowhitesaviors/>.

Defining Race, Racism, and Whiteness

Race is a sociohistorical construct. Scientific evidence proves that there is no biological basis for ‘races’ in the human species. Humans have far too little genetic diversity for separation into biological sub-groups.⁴² This not to mention that racial categories have never been stagnant, but are re-produced through social and historical movements.⁴³ In their seminal work *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant refer to race as a way of “making up people” and “othering.”⁴⁴ Sylvia Wynter’s speech-turned-article “Ethno or Socio Poetics” also speaks to race as a process of “othering,” but studied on a global scale and taking account for sweeping economic and historical movements like capitalism and colonialism. Wynter lays out how the ‘Western man’ became the center through the process of marginalizing (through the emergence of capitalism) the ‘non-Western Man’:

In other words, the new definitions of the "natural" institutionalized Western man as the NORM OF MAN; and non-Western Man as the OTHER, the not-quite, the non-men who guaranteed the Being of the Norm by his own non-being. In creating themselves as the norm of men, the Western bourgeoisie *created* the idea of the Primitive, the idea of the savage, of the "despised heathen:" of the "*ethnos*": they created the idea of their own negation.⁴⁵

Wynter explains how ‘Western’ and ‘Non-Western’ are co-dependent in their creation and that the creation of the ‘West’/‘We,’ was not possible without the ‘Non-west’/‘Other.’⁴⁶ Wynter also clarifies in her speech that before the ‘West’ existed,

⁴² Guy Harrison, *Race and Reality: What Everyone Should Know about our Biological Diversity* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2010).

⁴³ Karen Brodkin Saks, “How Jews Became White” in *Matrix Reader Examining the Dynamics of Oppression & Privilege* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2008), 89-96.

⁴⁴ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, (London: Routledge, 2014), 105.

⁴⁵ Sylvia Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” *Alcheringa/Boston University* 2, no. 2 (1976): 83.

⁴⁶ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 79.

before the ‘discovery’ of the New World, a group of people and states were bound primarily by their Christian identity. That is until the “*Christian* civilization of the West was metamorphosed into *Western* civilization and all other entities into the Non-West.”⁴⁷ Bandyopadhyay uses a similar framing of global relations and contends that the West is seen as “independent, masculine, active, rational” while the non-West is “childlike, feminine, passive, and irrational.”⁴⁸ Wynter’s theoretical framework and the dichotomy between the West and non-West in its implications for who is ‘other,’ is foundational to my conception of race and racial domination.

The illusive and evolving condition of race does not impede the very real social, economic, and political consequences of racial systems and ideologies—which are ultimately poised to eliminate. Omi and Winant consider that race “cannot even be noticed, without reference—however explicit or implicit—to social structure” and that to identify someone racially is to “locate them within a socially and historically demarcated set of demographic and cultural boundaries, state activities, ‘life-chances,’ and tropes of identity/difference/(in)equality.”⁴⁹ Race is inextricably tied to social, political, and economic exploitation/oppression. In this same vein, Ruth Gilmore advances a well-known definition of racism in her book *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*: “Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”⁵⁰ Here, ‘group-differentiated’ speaks to differences

⁴⁷ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 79.

⁴⁸ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 654.

⁴⁹ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 125.

⁵⁰ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, (California: University of California Press, 2007): 247.

(phenotypical, linguistic, neighborhood, citizenship) that are exploited in the making and remaking of categories (like white/nonwhite and west/non-west) that produce and rationalize an early death for some. While this definition frames my conception of racism more widely, I employ Omi and Winant's theory of both racist and anti-racist racial projects for this study.

The process through which racial meanings are produced and reproduced is what Omi and Winant term 'racial projects.' They define a racial project as "*simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines*"⁵¹ [emphasis original]. Racial projects occur at macro levels, like the prison system, and micro levels, like the protestor. Omi and Winant also hold that racial projects can 'travel'—seen for example in the shaping and reshaping of immigrants' racial ideas.⁵² Racial projects are considered 'racist' when they create or reproduce "*structures of domination based on racial significations and identities*" [emphasis original], while anti-racist projects are those which resist such structures of domination.⁵³

Whiteness, therefore, represents the dominant socio-historical category. George Lipsitz defines whiteness as "the unmarked category against which difference is constructed."⁵⁴ Lipsitz's book: *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* traces investments in whiteness through public policy in the United States from slavery,

⁵¹ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 125.

⁵² Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 126.

⁵³ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 128-129.

⁵⁴ George Lipstiz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 1.

immigration, the ‘New Deal’, FHA, urban renewal, and more. His central argument is that whiteness confers economic and social benefit, both historically and today, to people socially determined to be white.⁵⁵ This is sometimes referred to more generally as ‘white privilege’ or as Peggy McIntosh coined, “the invisible knapsack” that white people possess, which is metaphorically full of maps, blank checks, and resources that are unearned and yet guaranteed to white people.⁵⁶ The theoretical temptation of McIntosh’s ‘knapsack’ is to conceptualize whiteness on an individual basis wherein whiteness confers *extra* tools to some, rather than a system designed not just to benefit the categorical ‘white,’ but to create, in Gilmore’s definition, ‘premature death’ for those outside whiteness. Andrea Smith also argues that ‘whiteness’ operates differently under the logics of each of the three pillars of white supremacy which she defines as slavery/capitalism, genocide/colonialism, and orientalism/war.⁵⁷ For example, Smith argues that white supremacy, under a logic of genocide, would mark as few people ‘Native’ as possible because their value is in their land, whereas under slavery, white supremacy would mark as many people ‘Black’ as possible because their value is in their labor.⁵⁸ Smith’s article is meant for women of color organizers to understand how logics of white supremacy pursue domination differently through different racializations. Smith’s work offers contextual framing for my conception of whiteness and complicates singular conceptions of white supremacy.

⁵⁵ Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 22.

⁵⁶ Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in Race, Class and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study (New York: Worth Publishers, 2007).

⁵⁷ Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” in color of violence the incite! anthology (2013).

⁵⁸ Smith, “Heteropatriarchy,” 71.

Chapter One: Volunteer Motivation

What compels a young person to fundraise hundreds or thousands of dollars and travel to (often) another country with a team of people from their religious community in order to ‘serve’? Why are mission trips so popular? When asked about their motivations, participants reported a wide array. I report here on those which showed up most commonly and especially those motivations related to Christian institutions/faith and those that are produced by and reproduce racial ideologies. It is important to note that I do not report on those which are well-covered in other literature (i.e. affect change, travel, build a resume), although they did show up in my data.

Participants reported that their Christian identity played a significant role in motivating them to join mission trips due to a belief that mission trips validate Christian faith, a conception of religious duty, and orchestrated pressure from Christian institutions. These Christian-centered motivations call back to visions of colonial-era missionaries—emboldened by the church and a will to convert. Interviewees also frequently used the word ‘bubble’ to describe the location from which they wanted to escape, and they characterized mission trips as their avenue for escape. Finally, participants discussed the pull of receiving a ‘warm’ welcome from host communities without any cognizance of the power disparities between the ‘we’ and the ‘other’ (in Wynter’s words).

Fulfill Christian Identity

A reoccurring theme in interviews was the inherent importance of mission trips to the Christian faith, which was reinforced by Christian institutions. People talked about needing to go on a mission trip to fulfill or validate their Christian identity.

Participants talked about how to *be* a Christian, was to have *gone* on a mission trip. The two were intertwined—to the point where mission trips were not just traditional, but a necessary (and almost sacramental) element of participants' Christian faith—theologically, but also culturally. Breanna, a white woman who traveled on four mission trips, admitted that even while it's not her intention, mission trips sometimes felt like a "little badge I can stick on my Christian resume." Participants described how to be a 'good Christian' they needed to join a mission trip. Adam, a white man who traveled on two mission trips, one inside the U.S. and one to Mexico, describes this theme while talking about his motivations:

Um it really felt at the time like that was something that was like right to do and righteous and like spreading the gospel and being a like good evangelical Christian is to go off and go to different places and serve or, you know, be like a missionary kind of, for the for the time being.

Adam emphasizes his prior convictions about the morality of mission trips with language like 'right' and 'righteous' and touches on the Christian doctrinal motivation to '[spread] the gospel' (discussed more later), and ultimately equates being a 'good evangelical Christian' with going on mission trips. Another participant, Emma, describes a similar sentiment while answering a question about how participating in mission trips impacted her:

I don't know how, I don't, I feel like the trips to Mexico, especially the one in high school like it made me feel like a more *qualified Christian* since I had been on a mission trip and like, was willing to like fundraise, like, take a week of my summer and like, tell people about the gospel and like, post about it on Instagram and stuff. Like, I feel like it just made me, I don't know, feel more *solidified*. [emphasis added]

The phrase 'qualified Christian' stands out here as an important signal that mission trips cement Christian identity for participants. This leads us to ask: Why do participants feel that mission trips are a significant, and almost necessary, Christian rite of passage?

Christianity has deep ties to Western imperialism/colonialism. British Christians believed in their ‘duty’ towards the rest of the world—to save, civilize, and convert.⁵⁹ Bandyopadhyay and Patil use the example of Mother Theresa to draw a direct connection between imperial Christian missions and modern-day religious voluntourism:

Mother Teresa opened her work to thousands of annual volunteers often coming and going unannounced – a model that now inspires waves of evangelical trips to India (as well as other places in the global South)...Mother Teresa is the quintessential image of the white woman in the colonies, working to save the dark bodies from their own temptations and failures. This sort of religiously oriented volunteer tourism, then, is the contemporary manifestation of colonial-era imperial, missionary travel.⁶⁰

It is impossible to ignore the stark and direct line between colonial-era ‘missionaries’ and modern ‘mission trip’ participants. There is an expansive field of literature on colonial-era missionaries and their roles, impacts, and collaborations with colonizing governments, which I will not explore in-depth here.⁶¹ However, Joerg Rieger, a professor of theology and scholar in missiology (the study of Christian mission), argues that just as missionaries previously worked within colonial systems, modern mission trips work within neocolonial systems. He writes:

Colonial Christianity failed to question colonialism, mostly because it operated under the tacit assumption that the colonial enterprise was the Christian enterprise. Contemporary Christianity, by comparison, is even

⁵⁹ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 653.

⁶⁰ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 653.

⁶¹ See Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002); Jonathan Ingleby, *Beyond Empire: Postcolonialism and Mission in a Global Context* (Indiana: Authorhouse, 2010); George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1993); Dana L. Robert, *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914* (Minnesota: Eerdmans, 2008).

less able to question neocolonialism, mostly because we are unaware of its existence on a grand scale and how it shapes our mission.⁶²

Rieger speaks specifically to modern “volunteer mission teams” and how the power and wealth differential that plagued colonial-era missions, still plague mission trips although less overtly.⁶³ Participant’s belief that mission trips are fundamental to their Christian identity, reveals the enduring logic of colonial-era missions in modern Christian culture and supports their indissoluble connection.

A key ingredient to the ‘duty’ that Christians feel toward the ‘Other,’ historically and today, is the theological idea referred to as the ‘Great Commission.’ The ‘Great Commission’ comes from a passage in the Book of Matthew where Jesus, recently resurrected, instructs his disciples to: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”⁶⁴ This passage is the main biblical text used to support missionary travel. Participants emphasized the importance of this command in their motivation. Brenna said:

Okay, this sounds like super cheesy Christian, but it's true. I feel like I saw it [going on mission trips] as like fulfilling the Great Commission and like taking a step in that. So I guess like the value would be obedience, and honoring scripture and what God has commanded us to do.

For Brenna, mission trips were not only culturally important (to be a valid Christian), they were theologically important, in that *God wills* people to go (and to keep going) on mission trips. To not go on a mission trip, is to disobey the command of God. For many people, this scriptural command is non-negotiable both in its modern interpretation and

⁶² Joerg Rieger, “Theology and Mission Between Neocolonialism and Postcolonialism,” *Mission Studies* 21, no. 2 (2004): 210.

⁶³ Rieger, “Theology and Mission,” 213.

⁶⁴ Matt. 28:16-20 ESV.

application. Another interview participant, Abby, who traveled on six mission trips and currently works for an organization which coordinates missions, reflected:

I think like like biblically, you know, like the last words like Jesus said was to like go and make disciples of all nations. Like that was it. Like he was like: This is what you need to do. And so for me, it's like, yeah, I can, I could go to college and I could like get my degree and go like do that and like make money but I don't feel like that gives me any like *purpose*. Because I just I like, I've never had a passion for like, education or going to school. And when I do like this, when I do like missions and I'm leading worship like five times a week and like, doing those, I feel like *I'm doing my part in like the Great Commission*, which is going to make disciples...And I'm like, why not do this? Like, I don't think anything else would make me like as like *fulfilled*, I guess. And so, yeah, I think just like, knowing that like I'm like doing my part in the Great Commission is like, oh, like *I'm literally doing what God told me to do on Earth*. [emphasis added]

For Abby, mission trips offer an opportunity to feel a ‘purpose’ and feel ‘fulfilled,’ and they are indisputably an expression of obedience to God.

One obstacle in the ‘Great Commission’ motivating logic is that it’s hard to mount a counter-argument against God’s instruction. Heron argues that among white Canadian development workers, “The belief that this is ‘what God wants us to do’...is in a sense beyond contestation.”⁶⁵ The ‘Great Commission’ logic excuses complications and contradictions in mission trips. Moreover, it reveals that ‘service’ is not the preeminent goal, but converting people to Christianity is. In fact, evangelism is a central goal of many voluntourists.⁶⁶ Guttentag points out that when religious conversion is voluntourists’ goal, true cultural exchange is not possible because volunteers’ intention is to *impact/change* the host culture. Guttentag drew evidence from McGehee and Andereck’s research that found Tijuana residents expected/resented receiving the ‘God

⁶⁵ Heron, *Desire for Development*, 45.

⁶⁶ Ranjan Bandyopadhyay, “Volunteer Tourism and Religion: The Cult of Mother Teresa,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 70 (May 2018): 133.

talk' in exchange for volunteer's services.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Bandyopadhyay draws a connection between Christian proselytization and 'colonial nostalgia':

Christianity plays an indispensable role in this venture [to perpetuate raciology]—seeing, judging, evaluating and preaching the non-Christians in order to follow their principle and ideologies—so that non-Christians too become enlightened and thus modern. Hence, this study argues that contemporary depoliticized social causes such as 'volunteer tourism' to save and help the people in the Global South—the main purpose of this discourse is to resurrect imperial/colonial nostalgia.⁶⁸

Aiming to convert non-Christians into Christians because of a belief that the scriptures command such action positions volunteers as having ulterior motives when engaging with community members. It is also a manifestation of the colonial logic that says Westerners have a superior knowledge which must be bequeathed to their less fortunate brethren outside Euro-American borders.

Just as colonial missionaries were emboldened and supported by the Catholic church, modern Protestant Christian churches play a similar role by applying institutional pressure to encourage mission trip participation. Saul, a biracial man with experience on five mission trips, said that "short term missions trips were glorified in the church and like, in like, we're, quote unquote, doing our duty, so that was the mentality." Saul's conception of his 'duty' to travel on mission trips was not self-manifested, but co-created with a Christian institution—his church.

Churches disseminate a cultural story about Christian's 'duty' to attend mission trips partly through celebrating and centering mission teams upon their return. Lily, a white woman who went on three mission trips, relayed her experience with the church's celebration of mission trip participants:

⁶⁷ Guttentag, "The Possible Negative Impacts," 548.

⁶⁸ Bandyopadhyay, "The White Man's Burden," 340.

I'm reminded that like mission trip culture is really influenced by Christian culture. And if Christian culture, largely like really puts them up on a pedestal, which like literally, some churches do, like by inviting people to like, speak about their experiences afterwards... Yeah, because I definitely got asked to do that too. Like after the missions trip, you know, oh, can you come and speak about your experience?... I mostly talked about that and how it like, changed in Oh, it made me so grateful for my life in the US. It made me so grateful for this life that I have, because I'm rich and they're poor. I feel like that basically sums it up. I'm so glad that I'm rich and they're poor, was my thought.

Lily critically talked about the ‘pedestal’ the church offered her after her mission trip, and her storytelling with simplifications and disparity rationalizations. Other interviewees discussed how the upfront sharing by participants did in fact inspire them to pursue a mission trip. One mission trip leader said that he intentionally leverages post-trip storytelling to maintain community motivation. Through the idea that ‘good Christians’ go on mission trips, scriptural command, and institutional encouragement/pressure, Christian identity and mission trip participation proved interconnected, motivating young Christians to join trips.

Escape the ‘Bubble’

The word ‘bubble’ surfaced multiple times when people explained exactly why they felt compelled to travel. The term referred to a racially or socio-economically homogeneous setting, or to homogeneity in thought or attitude in the places interviewees called home. Breanna attempted to explain this phenomenon and how it motivated her to travel:

I think I've always enjoyed like getting to know other cultures and languages. And I've always wanted to travel. And so I do think that that was part of it, but I wouldn't say that was like, the main motivation was just to be able to travel somewhere. But I think, yeah, I hadn't I hadn't really been *exposed* to, like, my, my place where I grew up is kind of a *bubble*. You know, like, I grew up in the church and we were really involved in it, we—the only language offered at my school was Spanish,

which I loved, but it just shows like, there wasn't a whole lot of interaction with other cultures or languages, things like that. My church *is predominantly white* and so I don't know, I just wanted to be able to experience another culture and see what it's like to serve in another country. [emphasis added]

Breanna explained that her ‘bubble’ was defined by a lack of cultural and language diversity in her hometown and a predominately white church. The ‘bubble’ therefore represents a *lack of exposure* to different culture/place/language/people. But more than that, the ‘bubble’ is related to ideas about where social problems exist—that problems don’t exist inside the ‘bubble,’ and thus we must travel outside the ‘bubble’ in order to fix/serve/save. Tanya, a white woman with experience on six mission trips to Haiti, talked about this while discussing how her trips impacted her:

I would say one of the biggest things was just getting outside of the *bubble*. So I grew up in Orange County, Southern California, which is like a very, pretty wealthy, you know, like, you don't really see many people struggling. And so, to be able to go and like, serve, because there wasn't, there just wasn't a lot of *opportunity to serve*, I would say. So to be able to go and serve somewhere *where people are struggling*. It's very humbling, I guess. Also, just to, I would say one of the biggest things was just yeah. Exposing me to like the rest of the world. [emphasis added]

In this quote, escaping the ‘bubble’ is again about exposure, but more importantly, the ‘bubble’ signifies a sanitized conception of the US as not having many ‘people struggling,’ while desperation/trauma/poverty are projected onto the ‘other’ of the world. The glaring contradiction in Tanya’s reflection is the social injustice rife in Orange County, and every county, in the United States.

The origins of this homogenous ‘bubble’ can be traced back to World War II and the creation of white suburban identity. Lipsitz argues that it was in fact the suburbs which helped *transform* Euro-Americans into ‘whites’ by eliminating European ethnic

neighborhoods in the city through urban renewal.⁶⁹ Seongho Yoon's analysis of the suburbs looks through the lens of the main character of *No-No Boy*, Ichiro, who returned to his pre-war neighborhoods after being imprisoned by the federal government in Japanese concentration camps. For Ichiro, the suburbs represented a fantasy of American life: "the freestanding single-family dwelling with lawn, carport, and a bedroom for everyone."⁷⁰ Especially against the backdrop of overcrowding and poverty in the urban (read non-white) space, the suburb was a protective haven for whiteness.⁷¹ With neighborhoods no less segregated today than in the post-war period, the fact that white interviewees considered they grew up in a homogenous 'bubble' is the result of decades of racialized public policy meant to create exactly that—homogenous (white) bubbles—and participants' whiteness itself is deeply tied to inhabiting that very 'bubble.' Interestingly, participants did not characterize the 'bubble' positively as a utopic fantasy, but rather as a grueling and purposeless space, demonstrated in the ways they pursued escape via mission trips. Such a contradiction in the promise of white suburbia and the lived reality for my research participants hints at how systemic racial organizing costs everyone involved.

Interviewees' conception that real social problems only exist *outside* the 'bubble' exemplifies the Western imagination of the non-West as necessarily desperate. Heron explains this imaginary dichotomy between the spaces in her analysis:

This globalized world view is shaped by spatial representations that have remained intact over time; namely, that the countries of the North—home to the former metropoles of empire and their white-settler

⁶⁹ Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 7.

⁷⁰ Seongho Yoon, "'No Place in Particular': Inhabiting Postinternment America, Articulating Postinternment Anxieties in John Okada's *No-No Boy*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 43, no. 1 (2012): 55.

⁷¹ Yoon, "'No Place in Particular,'" 56.

dominions such as Canada—are places of greater civilization, of *order, cleanliness, and a truly good quality of life*, which has an evident material basis of comfort and security, while those of the South—the former colonies—*languish in anachronistic space, where chaos often reigns, disorder and disease are rampant*, and life seems (from our perspective) to be *hardly worth living.*⁷² [emphasis added]

Heron's elucidation of this North/South dichotomy is in line with Wynter's conception of the 'ethos' as the 'other'/'non-man'—which the 'norm of man' pits itself against to claim superiority. Western conceptions of the South as disordered and desperate is not only a production/reproduction of racial ideology, it is also a simplification of the lived experiences in the South and an erasure of the disorder and desperation in the North.

The linkage to the 'bubble' idea is the 'escape,' which interviewees so desired. This escape is not just about leaving, but simultaneously entering the chaotic spaces of the global South. Participants were motivated to voyage into slums/orphanages/red light districts—into the ideological opposite to their home place. Abby discussed how she was surprised at how her mission trips fulfilled such conceptions of the 'other' so entirely:

The first time I went, I think the first out of country, when I did was the Philippines, and I've just yeah, I've never, I don't know, like all that kind of stuff seems like fake until you like go. And it's like, oh, I've never *really seen like poverty*, or I've never seen like I don't know like this sounds really bad, like a really bad comparison. But like, yeah, like Slumdog Millionaire, like the movie of like, the slums in India. I was like, oh, that's like a movie set like, that's fake. But then like, I actually went and I was like, *that's so real*. And so, yeah, it was just really cool seeing like, I don't know, just my perspective changes, I was like, Yeah, like, *why would I not want to go see*, like, all these places that like people are and like, help in a way... [emphasis added]

Abby emphasizes the social and economic problems in India above all else and relates the experience of visiting to watching a movie. Besides the undertones of

⁷² Heron, *Desire for Development*, 34.

commodification, the excerpt reveals that escaping the bubble is as much about voyaging into poverty as it is about leaving homogeneous space. Moreover, the volunteer's seeing is what's emphasized. Bandyopadhyay explores the white gaze in relation to voluntourism saying that "the white gaze always evaluates its exotic Other while retaining whiteness at the top of the hierarchy."⁷³ For mission trip participants, their 'evaluation' is tangled with the dominant conceptions of non-Western people as essentially deprived. This deprivation is the *what* to which mission trip participants 'escape' their racialized space to witness.

Desire after a 'Warm' Welcome

The global South is conceived as extremely welcoming, hospitable, and appreciative of the volunteer's presence. Volunteers talked about desiring after this over-the-top welcome from host communities and how it played a role in their motivational schema. Jordan, a white woman who attended nine mission trips, talked about her experience:

I just love like connecting with other people. And um you get a, such a, I think I feel like blessed in from just interacting with other people and like, knowing that you've made a difference in their life, and like a positive impact. And so I think that's one thing that like has *always compelled me to go on mission trips*, because I do always feel that when we go like that, people, *you feel loved and you feel appreciated*. And not that I feel that like in my own community, but I would say that um it's just like a different, different type of feeling. [emphasis added]

Jordan discussed how she was motivated to attend mission trips to experience love and appreciation *from* the host communities. She notes that it feels 'different' from the love and appreciation she experiences at home. What creates this difference? Some cultures

⁷³ Bandyopadhyay, "The White Man's Burden," 329.

do express emotion more openly than others—like so-called ‘warm’ cultures—but beyond cultural dynamics, we can’t ignore the significant power disparity between volunteers and hosts, which likely play a role in volunteers feeling ‘loved’ and ‘appreciated.’ Peter, a white man who traveled to Mexico once and Uganda twice, talked about this theme from his trip to Uganda in which the mission team traveled to a new village each day to distribute ‘sponsorship packages’ to some of the children (only the ones who had been sponsored that year). He reflected on the reaction of the host community:

So my dad didn't want to spoil too much for me, but obviously I'd seen pictures, and knew that they were gonna be *extremely welcoming*. I just didn't know what that feeling was gonna be like. And when you get off, when you when the bus drives into the village, they're all lined up singing and dancing. And then when the bus stops, and the door opens, they flood to the door. And *they're just like screaming and smiling and they just want to like squeeze you and touch you* and it's, it's obviously very overwhelming, especially the first time. I was just like oh my gosh, like, this is crazy. There's so much emotion and excitement that we're here. [emphasis added]

Peter’s interpretation of the people’s reaction in each village lacks any critical acknowledgement of the power disparity present—that he and his team were bringing promises of an entire year (or more) of financial support to families.

Upon locating volunteers in historical and contemporary systems of domination—the ones that position them as the ‘norm’ and the hosts as the ‘other’—this motivation to experience the ‘overwhelming’ welcome of host communities seems little more than taking advantage of context in order to confirm superiority. Bandyopadhyay writes that “these young white Christian volunteer tourists’ aspiration to be treated superior and special like a king or queen for a day” clarifies that volunteer tourism is

just a new form of imperialism.⁷⁴ Volunteers' motivation to be welcomed and appreciated by host communities indicates, firstly, a lack of critical awareness of power disparities, and secondly, exhibits volunteers' desire to claim and experience their superiority. Evidently, much more informs volunteers' motivational schemas than just desires to 'help' or travel.

⁷⁴ Bandyopadhyay, "The White Man's Burden," 337.

Chapter Two: Reproducing Systems of Domination

Beyond the motivation participants conveyed, the actual trip—the interactions, activities, events, preparations, and reflections surrounding the *going*—is crucial to an analysis of mission trips as racial projects. To reiterate, Omi and Winant define a racial project as: “*simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines,*”⁷⁵ [emphasis original] and what makes a racial project *racist* is its reproduction of structures of domination. This chapter therefore explores how the mission trip complex, and white participants in particular, reproduce structures of domination within and around the *going*. Many themes are interrelated and/or interdependent and so overlap between themes is common. Beginning with an analysis of dehumanization and objectification in volunteers’ attitude toward people in host communities and ending with an examination of volunteers’ exceptionalism in the face of critique, this chapter identifies ten themes on the reproduction of racial/colonial ideologies and domination that surfaced in interviews.

Dehumanizing/Objectifying the ‘Other’

While the explicit dehumanization/objectification of people from host communities only showed up a few times in interview data, its presence in any form is alarming and calls into question how often such ideas pervade mission trips. When asked what types of questions he had after going to Uganda, Peter responded:

One of the fun ones was: can we bring one of, can we bring these kids back home? Just the joy that they have, was just like, I want to bring you home!

⁷⁵ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 125.

Peter's trip involved visiting a new village each day, and he talked about how meaningful it was to see the children in each village express joy in the context of poverty (another theme discussed later). In this quote, though, he's not just expressing his admiration for the children's joy, he is expressing his desire, albeit joking, to *take the children back with him*, as if they were souvenirs one might buy and pack in a suitcase. While Peter didn't literally mean he would have liked to kidnap Ugandan children to take back to the United States, his dehumanization of the children as mere *objects* of joy which could be *taken* draws a connection between mission trips and dehumanization of the 'other'—in this case, Ugandan children.

Another participant, Annette, participated in and led mission trips, but also worked for an organization that coordinated mission trips to Mexico. Annette recalled the appalling rhetoric of mission trip participants in her experience as a coordinator and how they impacted her perception of mission trips in general:

When Americans would be like: Oh those poor children, I want to send them to Disneyland, and they would like to have these lofty ideas like, I want to send orphans to Disneyland, and they would want to do that. And we would try and convince them, we don't need to send the kids to Disneyland, could you just help us with their meals? Or they would come and assume they didn't have parents and be like, I'm gonna adopt this one. I want this one. *Like, this isn't a toy store. It's not a pet store*, you know, anyway. Um so having those experience from the side of receiving Americans was very helpful and influential to me. So that when I lead groups, I tried to lead us as just as non-gross as possible, I guess, you know, like, just that we were coming as visitors. [emphasis added]

Annette's perspective from the receiving-end allowed her to recognize patterns in the conduct of mission trip teams and analyze conduct without the emotional investment of being part of the team. Most disturbingly, Annette said that Americans assumed that the Mexican children they met were up for adoption—and *picked out* which child they

wanted to adopt, as if in a ‘pet store’ or ‘toy store.’ Annette’s word choice likening children to pets or toys indicates the degree of dehumanization she observed from mission trip participants. In both excerpts, ‘othered’ children are little more than pawns or toys, which we, mission trip participants, play with and want to pack away and take home with us.

The dehumanization and objectification of children in Uganda and Mexico, evident in volunteer rhetoric, stems from the dichotomy between West and non-West. Sylvia Wynter describes how before the concept of ‘Western’ beget the concept of non-Western, under Pico della Mirandola’s humanist philosophy, man stood in a hierarchy between the angels and the animals. Then the

new arrangement, *secularly*, put Western man in the place of the angels, whilst below him is non-Western man – not quite man, not quite animal able to attain the status of *manhood* only if he *imitated* as closely as he could the gold standard of manhood, the normative model of man, Western man.⁷⁶ [emphasis original]

Wynter elucidates how Western man is the symbol of human, while non-Western man is the *almost* human. This hierarchical relationship between Western and non-Western, born and furthered through capitalism, colonialism, and racial ideology, pervades mission trips. After all, if non-Western people are not-quite-human, then picking out a child, like you would pick a toy or pet, makes sense.

I opened this chapter with a discussion of dehumanization not because it was the most common theme explicitly discussed by participants, but because it’s woven into and interdependent with many of the following results. Moreover, the presence of any explicit dehumanization and objectification suggests that there is much more non-

⁷⁶ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 84.

explicit dehumanization and objectification under the surface. There is no way to calculate the destructive effect of such dehumanization and objectification in the lives of people in host settings. Any continuance of any model of voluntourism must explicitly reject and resist such rhetoric and ideologies.

Flattening Social and Economic Issues

Interrelated with objectification/dehumanization, participants often simplified complex social and economic problems, either with common tropes like ‘poor-but-happy’ or with religious platitudes. This reveals broader issues with the mission trip model of going to serve in another country. Firstly, the ‘poor but happy’ trope is commonly associated with voluntourism, and especially mission trips. It refers to an explanation of the social conditions of poverty in a particular place, followed by an assertion of how happy the people who live in such conditions are. Guttentag cites four scholars who investigate this ‘poor-but-happy’ trope. The overarching concern is that such a conceptualization operates to *rationalize* poverty as something not just accepted by people in host communities, but *embraced* as producing special emotions and spiritual traits such as exuberant joy, gratitude, and contentment.⁷⁷

This trope appeared regularly in my study. For instance, Robin, a white woman talking about her mission trip to Costa Rica, said:

So a lot of it [the mission trip] was focused around, like being content in what you had, and like noticing all the things around you that you should be thankful for. And not really focusing on materialistic things. And I guess just showing us *how simplified living can be* and how *happy* those people are *without* having all these technology and nice cars, and all these things. [emphasis added]

⁷⁷ Guttentag, “The Possible Negative Impacts,” 546.

Robin remembered how she learned to question materialism *from* the happiness and contentment of Costa Ricans and their ‘simplified living.’ In context, her reference to ‘simplified living’ is a euphemism for poverty or need. Robin’s quote exemplifies the ‘poor-but-happy’ trope so common in voluntourist discourses and reveals the hazards of the logic: that non-materialism/‘simplified living’/poverty creates the conditions for happiness and contentment, and therefore that people surely don’t want or need such luxuries as ‘technology’ because that would threaten their spiritual happiness.

While the ‘poor-but-happy’ trope is the most common example of flattening the experiences and social and economic realities of host communities, participants expressed other simplifying logics—especially around disability politics. Quite a few interviewees reported working with people with disabilities, especially kids, and explained the systems which produce the need for their help. Abby relayed such an explanation from her trip to Uganda:

But it was like intense there was like—we would like go to like a children's home for like the disabled where like they, yeah, their parents just like brought them there for like a quote, unquote lesson, and left them there because they didn't want them. And so it was just like all these disabled kids that like didn't have families, and we would just like go and we'd like play with them.

Abby’s explanation of why parents gave care of their children with disabilities over to an organization is that it was a ‘lesson’—as in punishment—and that they ‘didn’t want them.’ This not only excludes social, economic, and cultural realities which influence such a significant parental decision, it villainizes the parent and lionizes the organization, and by extension, the volunteer. Abby was not the only interview participant who spoke on disabilities in international contexts with such simple logic.

Other people explained that cultural or spiritual taboos prevent parents from caring for their children with disabilities.

Religion also plays a significant role in flattening social problems abroad. God's 'will' or 'plan' can cover a multitude of complexities around poverty, death, disease, and inequalities. This is discussed more later when talking about the possibilities of mission trips to encourage a critical evaluation of global disparities. However, for the moment, religious platitudes are also pertinent to a discussion of de-complicating social issues. Ashley, a white woman talking about her mission trip to Kenya, reflected:

That trip was a little bit difficult because someone like died in our clinic. And so it was like, so hard. And it was like that sadness, but also just like seeing what else God was doing that whole trip. So it kind of just like—learned a lot about like—like kind of started, honestly, like questionings for me. Like, why was that baby not healed? Or like—but also like learning *just God is good throughout all of that*. [emphasis added]

Ashley confronts the death of a baby in the clinic put on by her team of mostly medical professionals on a mission trip. In reflecting on the tragedy, Ashley concluded that 'God is good' and didn't question the social, economic, and political context which contributed to the death of the baby—including the fact that the baby died while under the care of medical professionals from her team. Why did the family choose to bring their baby to foreign volunteers? Did they have other options? Did the volunteer medical professionals have the necessary training to provide care to infants? I don't know—but the point is that the questions weren't asked because the simple platitude that 'God is good' smoothed over the complexities and flattened the parents' tragedy in the process.

Scholars argue that this simplification of social and economic issues in host communities is actually part of the draw for volunteer tourists. Because voluntourists

have little to no context as to the social, economic, and political complexities in host communities, problems seem simple: people are poor but content, the parent of the child with disabilities abandoned them to teach them a lesson, the baby died but God is good. Problems in the global South seem less complex than problems at home—motivating volunteers to venture into the simple to ‘help.’⁷⁸ Furthermore, as Bandyopadhyay and Patil argue, facing social, economic, and political domestic issues proves even more complicated for young white Christian volunteers because they benefit from those systems. They say: “a deep engagement with [domestic] problems would inevitably involve an interrogation of relations of power having to do with gender, sexuality, race, and class within global North countries.”⁷⁹ Even more, by facing problems in the West—problems in our orderly ‘bubble’—we risk rupturing the moral dichotomy between the West and non-West that as Bandyopadhyay and Patil say “has been operative for centuries.”⁸⁰ Kenyan activist Boniface Mwangi admonishes Americans who want to go abroad to solve social problems rather than confronting the racism and economic inequality in the U.S.. He says: “You don’t know them. They don’t know you. They won’t listen to you...We have people working every single day [in Africa] to deal with those issues. Why don’t you start local before you go international?”⁸¹ The simplification of complex issues in the global South works to produce and reproduce mission trip participation while at the same time flattening the realities that people in host communities navigate.

⁷⁸ Rafia Zakaria, “The white tourist’s burden,” *Aljazeera America*, April 21, 2014; Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 651-652.

⁷⁹ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 652.

⁸⁰ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 652.

⁸¹ Goffe, “Taking on America’s ‘Voluntourism.’”

Inflated Qualifications and Lower Standards

Mission trips often allow participants to practice certain skills in ways that would never be allowed in the U.S. From teaching English in public schools to one-on-one prenatal counseling, participants talked about an array of professional skills they employed on mission trips without training, qualifications, or vetting. It should be noted that the responsibility for this lack of oversight is not necessarily on host countries, because volunteers often work outside of official systems. Emboldened by organizations facilitating such labor, Westerners find unusual opportunities to practice expert roles. This is effectively an exercise in exceptionalism, indulgence, and a conception of ‘non-Western’ people as not *requiring* a qualified professional.

Leah, a white woman on a mission trip to South Africa, talked about how her team was assigned to a prenatal clinic, and while there were nursing students on the larger team, there were no medical students or professionals on her team at the clinic. She describes her work while there:

Yeah, so we mostly went into people's homes. We—and one of them was just like learning the basics. Just like basic nutrition that like a pregnant woman should be having or like, *just basic health stuff that we were teaching them* like wash your hands. Like, like, don't drink alcohol. Except for in the in America typically is like, very well known. But with a lot of the mothers being teenagers, like as young as like, 13/14, like that, right? *My information for them was usually like news to them. So it was pretty easy in terms of figuring out like, what to educate them on.*
[emphasis added]

In essence, Leah’s work was imitating a pre-natal counselor—offering young mothers advice on dos and don’ts while pregnant and preparing for the baby. Leah’s rationalization is that the information they were sharing is common knowledge in the United States but not in South Africa. Therefore, just by being from the U.S., and proximate to this common knowledge about pregnancy, Leah felt able to educate new

mothers. People could argue that in some settings, medical professionals are so limited or inaccessible that any medical advice from anyone is helpful. I would argue that, firstly, there must be systemic problem-solving if that is the case (just as is needed in the U.S.). Secondly, how *helpful* is it really for a 20-something white woman from the United States to travel to South Africa to spend a couple weeks offering medical advice to young mothers-to-be? How does that perpetuate racial logics through disparate standards of care and the ‘expert’ white woman construction?

Interrelated to unqualified/underqualified volunteer work, participants also admitted to lower standards for work products, rationalizing the disparity by emphasizing the gratitude of host communities (a reiteration of the ‘poor-but-happy’ logic). Amanda, a white woman talking about her house-building mission trip to Mexico, said:

And then we would like bring basically the funding and supplies and build them a home. Same thing with obviously the house size was very *tiny compared to even a small house in America*, which I feel like it's shocking, like every time, like, you can continue to do it, but it's just like—this is all like, *they are so incredibly grateful*. [emphasis added]

Amanda was not the only person who specifically referenced the small volunteer-built houses in Mexico. Another person, Rob, a white man with experience on more than 40 house-building mission trips to Mexico, talked about how the houses they build have no running water, no kitchen (outdoor ones are common), and are a 20x24 foot rectangle. Again, someone could argue that a house to live in, no matter what it looks like, is better than no house. I would argue that volunteer house-building undermines local construction economies and reproduces disparate standards between the West and non-West. And those disparities are rationalized, just as global poverty is rationalized, by emphasizing the contentment and gratitude of receivers.

Guttentag considers that one of the negative effects of voluntourism is “hindering work progress and completion of unsatisfactory work,” referring to both skilled and unskilled volunteers. He talks about how local organizations, in catering to large groups of volunteers, actually suffer net costs because of the time and effort required to host such teams.⁸² Moreover, he contends that volunteers access professional experience and expert-status in ways that would be impossible at home.⁸³ Vrasti, interviewing long-term independent voluntourists in Ghana, found that many were disappointed with the *lack of access* they were afforded to schools and hospitals in order to entertain expert skills—exposing a logic of expectation among Western voluntourists that they will do unqualified work while abroad.⁸⁴ A lack of qualification and lower standards for work products are both an expression and reproduction of racial logics which would say that ‘non-Western’ people are not-quite-so-human as to deserve trained medical professionals or homes with insulation and running water. Volunteers reinforce such an ideology in their work and, in the process, can hinder local organizing and economies which might actually be able to address the problems.

Building (Temporary) Relationship

Participants often consider ‘building relationships’ as a core goal of mission trips. While rarely studied in literature on voluntourism, Joerg Rieger, a scholar in missiology, considers that emphasizing building relationships might mitigate the reproduction of colonial legacies in missions. He claims that building relationships turn mission trips from a “one-way street” into a mutual exchange complete with learning

⁸² Guttentag, “The Possible Negative Impacts,” 543.

⁸³ Guttentag, “The Possible Negative Impacts,” 544.

⁸⁴ Vrasti, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South*, 98-99.

and spiritual sharing.⁸⁵ But even Rieger admits that “the problem with understanding mission as relationship is...[that] we often fail to give an account of the deeper inequalities and differentials in power.”⁸⁶ This lack of awareness can hinder authentic relationship and mutuality.

In my research, participants confirmed the ‘building relationships’ ambition in mission trips and used this aim to provide moral cover against criticism that mission trips don’t accomplish much. However, when asked about how or if participants maintained any relationships with people they met from host communities, only one or two people talked about specific people with whom they stayed in contact. Otherwise, people talked about having pictures of people on their phones or being connected through social media. One of the people with experience leading mission trips, Ted, talked about this concept and noted the fallacies in the logic:

I've always had a hard time with that concept. Because—or at least it needs the appropriate definition around it. Because if you and I are honest, on all the trips we have, *those relationships don't exist anymore*. The the students that I met that, er sorry, the kids that I served at the orphanage, I have pictures, of course, in my phone of twin girls that I'm holding and they painted my face, right. And so I've always had a hard time with that. Because if you just throw a blanket statement out that the point is to build relationships, you're building a relationship for a couple hours, and then it goes away? It just disappears? That's not authentic, genuine, even healthy relationship. It's good...it just has to be properly with proper boundaries, or else, or else you're gonna end up being Facebook friends with someone that that's in Mexico, and it turns really unhealthy, it could turn really unhealthy really quick. And *potentially manipulative and exploitive on either party*, and it could get, it could get rough. [emphasis added]

Ted admitted it didn’t make sense for a mission trip’s goal to be ‘building relationships’ because of the short time periods during which volunteers interact with host

⁸⁵ Rieger, “Theology and Mission,” 215-216.

⁸⁶ Rieger, “Theology and Mission,” 218.

communities. Even more, Ted referenced how those ‘relationships’ can become unhealthy because of possible manipulation or exploitation, which is a reflection of the power differential that Rieger noted. What is ‘relationship’ between a white volunteer from the West going to ‘serve’ in the global South for little more than a week?

Similarly, many volunteers disclosed little to no knowledge of host communities’ language (except perhaps skills from high school Spanish classes). A couple participants couldn’t even name the local language! Lily talked about her frustration with volunteers’ lack of commitment to relationships with local people and how language played a role:

I feel like the farthest we would go to like really build relationship was like to ask [local people] to work on the site with us, ask them to like build the house with us. But I feel like beyond that there wasn't, there wasn't much done, you know. And even for the people that had gone on the mission trips—like some of them were like “Yeah, this is my 15th year” you know, *still wouldn't know like a lick of Spanish*, still wouldn't, you know it was just weird, you know, you know you're coming here every single year and you know, so so many families every year that *you've come to like meet and grow in relationship with yet you still don't like make an effort to speak to them.* [emphasis added]

Lily reflected how it was ‘weird’ that people went on mission trips repeatedly to the same location and still wouldn’t make an effort to learn the local language. Lily’s disillusionment begs the question: How committed are participants to the ‘relationships’ they are building if they don’t care to learn even a little of the local language in order to speak with people? The lack of language skills among volunteers reveals another fallacy to the ‘relationship building’ logic of mission trips and reinforces how volunteers’ ‘relationships’ with people in host communities are, at best, temporary.

Contextualized in global systems of domination, the ‘relationship building’ trope reveals the desire of the West to know the ‘Other’ but to maintain no commitments or mutuality with them. Heron writes that:

This desire to know the Other takes various forms: romanticizing, identifying with (being ‘at one with’), caring for, saving, being seduced by, and transformed through this relationship. Nevertheless, binary relations remain unchanged throughout: it is a question of ‘them’ being known by ‘us,’ and being assessed by and understood through ‘our’ standards.⁸⁷

Standards for ‘relationship’ are different on mission trips because it is not a relationship within the ‘us,’ but between the ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Moreover, volunteers’ lack of language skills is a perfect example of the devotion to ‘our standards’ in relationship. While studying voluntourists in Honduras, Schneider discovered a trend wherein voluntourists “distance themselves, physically and socially, from the Honduran ‘Other’” and ended up “retreat[ing] to white spaces.”⁸⁸ Among Schneider’s participants, part of the motivation to withdraw to white spaces was a fear of being *exploited* by Honduran people, similar to Ted’s concern and another example of power differentials in relationships. While mission trip participants may contend that they are ‘building relationships,’ such relationship building is rationally faulty as well as saddled with power disparities and racialized notions of knowing the ‘other.’

Uninformed/Underinformed on Host Culture and History

While some longer mission trips (a month or more) included prior training on host culture, the history of the country, and travel etiquette, the vast majority of short-term mission trips included little to no training, with one exception: gendered concerns

⁸⁷ Heron, *Desire for Development*, 34.

⁸⁸ Schneider, “Exotic Place,” 701-702.

around modesty. In Christian contexts, modesty refers to propriety, especially related to clothing, and particularly women's clothing. Tanya, a white woman who went to Haiti six times, responded to a question about cultural training by saying:

So one of the biggest things was *modesty*. Oh, this actually goes into the culture as well. So it's really hot there. And they had an issue some years *with girls showing up in short-shorts*, which we don't really think of as a problem here. But there, that's like not really something that's okay. So they recommended, you know, like, here, like, we're going to have to implement, like, if you're wearing something you shouldn't be wearing, or that's making people uncomfortable, we're going to ask you to change, or just in first place, please don't pack these things. You know, and so that was one of the big things was modesty. *And obviously, it's a missions trip*. So that should have been straightforward, but I guess it wasn't [laugh] a couple times. [emphasis added]

Tanya remembered modesty as the primary training topic prior to traveling to Haiti. She specifically referenced issues with 'girls showing up in short-shorts,' emphasizing that 'modesty' is primarily a women's issue. This concern with gendered modesty showed up repeatedly in interviews, especially among women-identifying participants.

Participants considered that modesty was under the banner of 'cultural training' because it was required by host cultures.

The concept that cultures in the global South are more 'modest' is actually connected to colonial legacies as well as the colonial/modern gender system. Hames-García draws this connection in his article: "Are Sexual Identities Desirable?" using the work of Teresia Teaiwa who studies how missionaries to the Pacific Islands violently pursued conversion and with that conversion, modesty, as the Native people were considered "too naked and sexually libertine."⁸⁹ With the rise of modernity, Hames-García laments:

⁸⁹ Michael Hames-García, "Are Sexual Identities Desirable?" in *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 79.

In an irony of history, the eventual success of many colonized people in conforming to Eurocentric ideals of gender and sexual morality would eventually become a justification for additional imperial interventions, this time in the name of liberating ‘their’ women and defending freedom for sexual minorities.⁹⁰

The assimilation of colonized people to imposed standards of gender and sexual expression became reason enough for new imperialism—because surely their way was backward and repressive. Participants’ claim that preparing for ‘modesty’ equated cultural preparation is a reproduction of such colonial logic, though none of the participants would likely have known this. The failure of mission trips to prepare participants on the intricate and dynamic cultures and histories of host locations not only sets them up poorly to engage, it risks (and even ensures) repetition of colonial patterns.

One of the most stark exclusions in participant narratives is any discussion of colonial histories and especially the intersection of mission history with colonialism. On a mission trip to the Navajo Nation reservation, Breanna talked about preparing for ‘spiritual darkness’ and admitted later that her team had no discussions about colonialism:

We had a video call with the camp director who lived in Montana and he told us a lot about the *spiritual darkness* and so that was really, really helpful to hear, not just about like what are the cultural norms and things like that, but also like, how does that play into a spiritual aspect...And anyways, they there's just like a lot of *mysticism* and they [Navajo people] believe in like, a spiritual realm, not in like a, like angels and demons kind of way, but like *animals having spirits and like their ancestor spirits*. [emphasis added]

In her interview, Breanna talked about how understanding Navajo ‘spiritual darkness’ helped her navigate interactions with the Navajo children who attended the Christian

⁹⁰ Hames-García, “Sexual Identities,” 79.

camp. This ‘spiritual darkness’ is a clear allusion to Navajo spiritual traditions which are different from Christianity and therefore ‘dark.’ Not only is the discussion of ‘spiritual darkness’ an expression of religious intolerance, it is a reproduction of the United States foundational/colonial logic that regards Native people as backwards, evil, and as described in the Declaration of Independence, “merciless Indian savages.”⁹¹ As Bandyopadhyay argues, any efforts toward the ‘Other’ that are uninformed by colonial legacies or “global power relations” are doomed to repeat past processes.⁹² The lack of preparation in mission trips, especially about colonial histories, sets them up to repeat the past—evident in the examples above of non-contextual discussions on cultural ‘modesty’ and comments about ‘spiritual darkness’ in Native American communities.

Affectionate Saviorism and Racist Paternalism

When asked about what criticisms of mission trips they had heard, participants repeatedly referenced the ‘white savior’ accusation (and how they were different). In an article on the “White-Savior Industrial Complex,” Teju Cole explains white saviorism as “a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied.”⁹³ This explanation connects back to volunteers’ desire for a ‘warm’ welcome—interrelated with the ‘godlike savior’ construction. In my research, I found that ‘saviorism’ played out differently along gender lines. Below, I refer to women’s production as affectionate saviorism and men’s production as racist

⁹¹ Thomas Jefferson, et al, July 4, *Copy of Declaration of Independence*, July 4, 1776, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbib000159/>.

⁹² Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 648.

⁹³ Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

paternalism. In both, the simple critique of ‘white saviors’ becomes endlessly complex and could constitute a thesis of its own. Here, I tease out some of the intricacies of both and connect them to racialized and colonial gender and sexual logics.

Female-identifying participants repeatedly talked about how their goal on mission trips was to make people in host communities, especially children, feel ‘loved,’ ‘seen,’ ‘valued,’ etc. Chloe, a white woman who went on a longer mission trip to four countries in Southeast Asia, Central America, and Eastern Africa succinctly describes this theme:

And I think, yeah, just knowing that literally, like, if the Lord called us like all the way across the ocean for like *one kid* to like see—*feel seen and loved* then like that would totally be worth it. And that could totally be what like the Lord wants to do there. [emphasis added]

Chloe emphasized that she and her team’s presence was warranted if ‘one kid’ felt loved. This narrative implicitly assumes that that ‘one kid’ doesn’t have enough love and care from their own community and needs a Western volunteer to gift it to them. Another participant, Tanya, talked about how in Haiti it’s important that the kids at the orphanage “[see] people come back” because it demonstrates commitment that “we’re not gonna like leave you, you know” (even though the team only visits annually for about a week). She reflects on her team’s impact and says: “these are kids who have been tossed out, and a lot of them know their parents, and their parents just want nothing to do with them, and so the impact that we can show is that, hey, you have a family.” Tanya reiterations Chloe’s same logic that people in the global South, especially children, require a white woman to come in and show them care, because their community can’t or won’t care for them.

This affectionate saviorism is also referred to as the ‘white woman’s burden’ by Bandyopadhyay and Patil, insinuating the incorporation of white women into the project of white supremacy and imperialism coined as the ‘white man’s burden.’

Bandyopadhyay and Patil consider that:

While for British men, such a discourse [of saving non-Western women] consolidated a colonial masculinity which justified and legitimated colonial policies, for British women, it was a bid for space in the political and civil realms of nation and empire, from which they were excluded.⁹⁴

Heron also discusses the incorporation of women into colonial projects over time and argues that Christianity actually provided “an effective safeguard of respectability” for Western women’s participation.⁹⁵ White Christian women have historically occupied a tenuous place in empire, but their participation in colonial projects elevated and secured their social position. Female participants’ logic that their presence is necessary to love and care for children in the global South is both an expression and a continuation of this ‘bid for space’ in empire. Saving the ‘other’ solidifies that we are part of the savior-class, the ‘us,’ the ‘norm of men.’

Male-identifying participants expressed a different, although allied, form of saviorism: racist paternalism. While both men and women interviewees referenced doing work to ‘help’ women in host communities, men disproportionately talked about such endeavors. When asked to relay a significant or memorable part of a trip, men zeroed in on experiences with women in ‘red-light districts.’ Luke, a white man, reflected:

⁹⁴ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 649.

⁹⁵ Heron, *Desire for Development*, 32.

And then in Tijuana, I think for me, when we went to the red-light district, and we had the guys hand out the flowers. That was—I just remember giving one to one of the girls and she just being like, surprised that I was just giving her a flower. Kind of like, she was like, *Oh, that's it?* I was like, yeah, I just wanted to give you this. And she was like, *Oh, wow.* That kind of just—like that the power of that kind of was like—cause of what they go through. And it was like: *Oh, you're a man, and you just want to give me a flower. Like, are you sure you don't want anything else?* I'm like, no, just want to give you this rose or whatever flower we had. *That was super impactful.* [emphasis added]

Luke remembered that the mission trip team specifically elected the ‘guys’ to give out flowers to women standing on the street in the ‘red-light’ district. He considered that the action was meaningful to those women by what he interpreted in their reaction. Luke believed that it was specifically his *masculinity*, the fact that he was a ‘man,’ that made the interaction meaningful to the woman—because he didn’t ‘want anything else.’ This concept is born of colonial logics which perpetuate a vision of the global South as feminine and lacking a masculine-enough presence—therefore justifying the male colonizer’s presence.⁹⁶ This presence especially operates to educate the colonized on ‘right’ behavior in relation to sex and gender.⁹⁷ Luke, and other male participants, fulfilled this paternal charge by attending to the women in Tijuana seemingly prostituting themselves in the red-light district. The flower is, in some ways, a symbol of their instruction in ‘right’ sexual behavior, masked with care—but ultimately aimed to change their behavior and be ‘saved’ by the white paternal figure.

Peter expressed this paternalistic logic in such explicit terms, it’s impossible to ignore. When asked about the most memorable part of his trip, he replied:

So the men in Uganda are, they’re kind of few and far between, the good ones. And so a lot of them [children] are raised by single moms. Not all of them, but a good chunk of them. *And so when they see a male, a tall*

⁹⁶ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 649.

⁹⁷ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 648.

white male come in and like care for them, it means literally, like means the world to them, because their father had either abandoned them or if the father is in the house, *he's very strictly business not not very on the compassionate, loving side*. And then when they see a white person come in and like, want to give you hugs and play with you, like their, just *their world is just lit up*. [emphasis added]

Peter's tone was not ironic in this excerpt. He genuinely spoke to the power of a 'white man' entering Uganda to care for children abandoned or emotionally neglected by their own father. In this way, Peter directly likened himself to a parent and considered that his temporary parental input has the ability to 'light up' the world of a child. While this is not necessarily an instruction in 'right' sexual behavior, it is an instruction in 'right' *masculine* behavior—a core practice in colonialism. Colonizers deemed men in the global South oppressive of women and/or deviant from "norms of (imperial white) masculinity"—and therefore, inferior.⁹⁸ Male volunteers' saving of women in the global South from their own sexual impropriety in 'red light' districts and saving of children from improperly-masculine men in the global South constitutes a production/reproduction of racist paternalism.

Entitled to Authentic Trauma (Voyeurism)

Interrelated with saviorism, participants emphasized stories of desperation, poverty, and trauma in their storytelling of the most memorable or significant parts of their trip. Seeing, hearing, and even touching such authentic trauma proved a core ambition of volunteers—especially evident when such an ambition went unmet. Molly, a white woman who traveled to the Dominican Republic, relayed disappointment at how her organization thwarted 'authentic' engagement with the community:

⁹⁸ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, "The White Woman's Burden," 649.

I think I was missing out on like, the typical, natural culture... and it I don't want to say it felt forced, but it wasn't like, there was limited exposure to like, people that weren't involved in Students International. And because of that, I felt like I was missing the normal, everyday like cultural and also like, the relational aspect of like, okay, like, who are these people? Like, what have they been through? What is it like to live in this country? And like, those were all questions that we asked [Matheus], but [Matheus] was from Nicaragua and he is financially stable. He has a job for Students International, like he's doing well, you know. And it's like, what about those people that I see on the side of the street that like, aren't? Like, what's their story? What is it like to be here for them?

Molly was disappointed that the organization she traveled with, Students International, didn't provide opportunities to engage with the 'normal, everyday' culture. She felt like she didn't hear/see what the people in the host community had 'been through' or 'their story.' She got to know an employee at Students International, but it didn't count, in part, because he was 'financially stable.' This logic exposes volunteers' expectation that mission trips will provide an opportunity to gaze upon and encounter authentic trauma in host communities—an expectation that most of the time, is fulfilled. While talking about her trip to Mexico, Jordan shared about her favorite volunteer site:

It was called the Gabriel House and it was a house for kids with special needs that their parents, either the government took them away from their parents, because the parents couldn't care for them, or the parents willingly dropped them off, because they know they can't care for them, like around the clock. *And so that was my favorite experience.* Because, um, while we were there, we saw a dad drop off his, he had twin daughters, and one of them had Down Syndrome and he just couldn't care for her. And so he dropped one of them off and not the other one and so like that was really hard to see. But, um, that, but he was making the decision, you know, out of his daughter's best interest. [emphasis added]

Not only is it surprising that volunteers consistently gained access to vulnerable populations, like children with disabilities, but the word choice Jordan uses to describe

the visit: ‘favorite,’ communicates joy or intrigue at witnessing such a heart-breaking moment.

The voluntourist’s gaze, our gaze, seeks out desperation, heartbreak, trauma, and poverty in the global South and consumes it with eagerness and intrigue. A.M. Gahutu, in their article: “Towards Grim Voyeurism: The Poetics of the Gaze on Africa,” likens the gaze of tourists to cannibalism saying:

Extremely thematised and in solidarity with necrology and of course with cannibalism – since it [the tourist’s gaze] concerns the consumption of death by means of the tourist industry among others, this gaze which mediatises death turns it into the emblematic image of the black continent.⁹⁹

‘Death’ in their article concerns tourism to sites of genocide, but also the “living dead included, skinny due to hunger or disease.”¹⁰⁰ Gahutu considers the camera as the essential tool tourists use when feasting on trauma—a tool standard among mission trip participants. A concern with pictures also surfaced in an article on slum visits in India as David Fennell asks: “Would you want people stopping outside of your front door every day, or maybe twice a day, snapping a few pictures of you and making some observations about your lifestyle?”¹⁰¹ In scholarship on voluntourism, discussions of voyeurism were almost completely absent. Future research should study voluntourism’s relationship to voyeurism. Mission trip participants’ investment in finding authentic trauma is not just a reproduction of global power disparities, but an entitlement to see and own (through photos) the other’s pain. Tuck and Yang, in instructing on practices

⁹⁹ A.M. Gahutu, “Towards Grim Voyeurism: The Poetics of the Gaze on Africa,” *Rwanda Journal* 1 (2016): 78.

¹⁰⁰ A.M. Gahutu, “Towards Grim Voyeurism,” 80.

¹⁰¹ Eric Weiner, “Slum Visits: Tourism or Voyeurism?” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/12/travel/12iht-14heads.10986274.html>.

of refusal in research say: “Analytic practices of refusal involve an active resistance to trading in pain and humiliation, and supply a rationale for blocking the settler colonial gaze that wants those stories.”¹⁰² While they are not talking about tourism, such a practice of refusing to center/exploit pain, and ‘blocking the settler colonial gaze’ in the process, would be a relevant goal for voluntourism moving forward.

Mission Team Indulgence

On mission trips, the teams, and not the host communities, typically occupy the position of central importance. Mission trips are organized around the volunteer teams—aiming not just to serve their needs, but to indulge them as well. In interviews, this showed up in many forms, but the most striking was from mission trips to San Francisco. Many participants who traveled to San Francisco went through the same organization: YWAM (Youth with a Mission). YWAM hosts mission teams at its base in the Tenderloin district—a neighborhood with high rates of homelessness. Participants repeatedly referenced a ‘homeless plunge,’ where participants were told to sleep on the floor until the early morning, when they had to leave with no money, food, or water for the day. James, a white man, talked about his experience:

That day that we were told to go experience homelessness for a day, like I remember a lot about that day. Like, I remember just my feet hurting super bad from walking everywhere, and like not being able to sleep the night before...But then also, other people that were experiencing homelessness kind of interacting with us and kind of saying, like, *they were definitely upset that we were doing it...* Like yeah, I remember my group went to two different, like food kitchens or pantries or whatever they're called. And the first one, it was just like, super early in the morning and we were just like, looked at weird, but like, no one really said anything, but we all felt so uncomfortable being there. And the second place we went to was a lot nicer. It felt like more of an actual like

¹⁰² Tuck and Yang, “Unbecoming Claims,” 812.

restaurant or food court kind of thing. And *someone like yelled at us while we were eating. Just because they're like: Why are you taking our food!?* You know, getting all angry at us, which is justified in my opinion. [emphasis added]

James described how his group visited free meal sites to eat during their ‘homeless plunge’ day, and how other people at the meal sites, visiting out of need, reacted to their presence—in fact, yelling at them, accusing them of stealing food. One must wonder how many teams YWAM hosts in a single summer, and therefore how many groups of not-homeless teenagers regular attendees encounter at meal sites. It is not only demeaning that mission trip volunteers would *imitate* being homeless for a day, but that they would then eat meals set aside for people who need them—it’s no wonder someone yelled.

Some might argue that an experience like the ‘homeless plunge’ works to build compassion in young people toward those experiencing homelessness. Besides the fact that playing homeless for a day gives, at best, superficial insight into the experience of homelessness, I would argue that an experience which educates mission teams *at the expense* of real people experiencing homelessness is not about education or compassion-building, it’s about indulgence. Guttentag warns that voluntourism can neglect the desires of local people in favor of the desires of voluntourists, especially because voluntourism businesses/organizations have a vested interest in keeping volunteers satisfied.¹⁰³ Volunteers are the consumer and market. Repetto and Iser found that in Ya’axnaj, Yucatán, a voluntourism development project primarily catered to the tourist, at the expense of Mayan people and culture:

De esta manera, el proyecto turístico no tiene otra alternativa que la de poner en escena y espectacularizar bienes y prácticas culturales que

¹⁰³ Guttentag, “The Possible Negative Impacts,” 541.

desde fuera se demandan, y esconde bajo la idea de revaloración cultural lo que no es otra cosa que la mercantilización de estos bienes y prácticas./ In this way, the tourism project has no other alternative than to showcase and spectacularize goods and cultural practices that are demanded from the outside, and hides under the idea of cultural revaluation what is nothing other than the commodification of these goods and practices.¹⁰⁴

The commodification of Mayan culture and goods (plain with the example of vegetarian Mayan food) is tied up with the essentialization and spectacularization of the Mayan people. Voluntourism attends to volunteers first and prepares experiences and goods for their pleasure and consumption—with varying attention as to the desires/needs/impacts in host communities.

Centering White Bodies and Singling Out Non-White Bodies

In the same way that teams occupy central spaces, white bodies are centered and admired, while non-white bodies are targeted in host settings—a theme which hasn’t been addressed in literature on voluntourism. Abby, a white woman, talked about being proposed to *twelve* times while in Uganda because she’s an “American girl” and “American girls are seen as...the ideal.” Later on she reflected on the prominence of her blonde hair and white skin in countries like Uganda and The Philippines:

Blondes are like a huge deal in a lot of other countries. Like when I was in the Philippines, like they would like *love to touch my hair because it was blonde* and like they—because like, in Uganda and in the Philippines, like most people have black hair. And so like yeah, this is rare, like I see this on TV kind of thing. And also like *white skin*, especially in like Asian countries has been like, like, I know I’m sure you’ve like heard of like, like, Korean women like trying to make their faces whiter and buying like white makeup and they like—it’s just because it’s like, the standard of beauty is like, like, American culture, like Hollywood actresses. [emphasis added]

¹⁰⁴ Repetto and Burgos, “Esencialización y espectacularización,” 26.

Abby connected the admiration of her blonde hair and white skin to the effects of Hollywood beauty standards in other cultures and the rarity of blonde hair and white skin in the places she visited. Not only is her hair and skin centered in host settings, it is revered—evident in the dozen marriage proposals she received. However, I would argue that it is not an inheritance of whiteness that necessarily creates such an experience like Abby’s, but that whiteness, like Wynter’s ‘norm of man,’¹⁰⁵ exists through comparison with an ‘othered’ body. In other words, Abby’s physical location in Uganda and The Philippines impacted the naming and admiration of her body as ‘white’ because of her environment. Vrasti, from her experience both as a voluntourist and researcher in Ghana, contends:

Ghana is one of the most hospitable countries I ever visited. But the reasons for this are complicated. On the one hand, Western tourists perceive Ghana as such a welcoming place because there are obvious advantages to being white in this country. You always get the best seat on the bus, the biggest plate of food, the place in front of the line.¹⁰⁶ Vrasti’s description is a reminder of volunteers’ motivation for a ‘warm welcome,’ but also implicates the *body* as conveying special status/privilege. Vrasti goes on to discuss that for volunteers, the high racial visibility they experience in Ghana made them uncomfortable to the extent that some saw themselves as “victims of ‘reverse racism.’”¹⁰⁷ Vrasti attributed the discomfort of white volunteers to color-blind politics in the West.

For people on mission trips not read as white, the experience didn’t prove the same. Two interview participants spoke about how non-white volunteers on their teams

¹⁰⁵ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 83.

¹⁰⁶ Vrasti, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South*, 104.

¹⁰⁷ Vrasti, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South*, 104.

were racially singled out. Abby said: “When I was in Haiti, like we had a kid on our team who was Korean and like all the little like Haitian kids called him Jackie Chan.” And another white woman, Rose, talked about the racialization of team members in Poland: “The majority of my team, you know, has lighter skin but one of the guys was from Hawaii, he was Filipino, and everyone would call him Black Panther because, you know, people—he stands out, it’s very rare to see people of color.” In both examples, non-white team members are compared to famous people of different ethnicities from their own—a singling out, but not necessarily in admiration. The racialization of bodies that aren’t read as white leads to the conclusion that non-white volunteers *stand-out* from mission teams to the degree that people in host communities call attention to such dissimilarities. Schneider is the only author I found to discuss this trend in voluntourism. In one small point of his research, he identifies that an Asian American interviewee faced “racial slurs.”¹⁰⁸ Future research could investigate the particular experiences of non-white voluntourists, especially with how they experience racialization within teams and host communities, and what privilege a Western identity confers in tandem with such racialization.

Evading and Transferring Responsibility (Exceptionalism)

Participants’ exceptionalism is a crucial factor in the chronic reproduction of domination in mission trips. While interview participants demonstrated an understanding of common critiques of voluntourism (i.e. white saviorism, inefficiency, harmful to local economy, disrespectful to host culture and people, self-serving, etc.), almost no one took responsibility for their own trip as manifesting such problems. The

¹⁰⁸ Schneider, “Exotic Place,” 699-700.

most common evasion and subsequent transfer of responsibility was the ‘bad apples’ trope—referring to an unnamed *other* mission trip as problematic, but not their own.

Abby spoke to this theme:

The reason why like missions have such a bad name, or like a bad rap, is because there have been people that have gone before that aren't trained and don't really know what they're doing and like, yeah, just like, I don't know, *like a few few bad apples ruin the whole batch*. And so it's like, yeah, there are really, really good people who are like, going out and like fighting the good fight and like doing their thing, and it's great. And there are people who aren't doing that. And it's, yeah, *unfortunately it's like gotten a bad name because of like, the few bad apples*, but yeah.
[emphasis added]

Abby considered that there are ‘good’ mission trips and there are ‘bad’ ones, differentiated by a lack of training/preparation (odd, since reports of any cultural or contextual training were rare in my study). Other people differentiated ‘good’ trips from ‘bad’ trips by type of service, amount of evangelism, or a ‘right’ volunteer mindset. The ‘bad’ mission trips were never those that interviewees participated in—it was always an imagined other. Abby considered that it is the *fault* of the few unnamed ‘bad’ trips that mission trips, in general, receive critique. This logic is dangerous in that it not only evades and transfers responsibility, but it offers the opportunity to continually *project* critiques onto the ‘other’ mission trip—so as to never face or reckon with our own culpability in the reproduction of systems of domination through mission.

Another way participants evade responsibility for the actions and impact of their mission trip is to transfer responsibility onto the ‘local’ organization they work with.

Ted, a team lead, talked about this viewpoint:

I guess also, just from my point of view, I just trust the organization to take care of that aspect [impact in the community]. I mean, you remember, when we get there, I release all control to [Ally] and [Noah], who know the community, know the needs of the community know

what's appropriate and what's not, and and, and they have really God's heart for that city. And so I kind of just submit to that, and trust them that they can take care of the service aspect.

While trusting local organizations with the leadership of mission teams appears favorable, the organization referenced in this quote is not a ‘local’ organization, but an international organization called YWAM (Youth With A Mission). YWAM has outreach posts in more than 180 countries around the world and their founding mission is to facilitate mission trips. They claim to have been “launching waves of missionaries into the world since 1960.”¹⁰⁹ While YWAM allows each ministry to lead its own projects, they are not true ‘local’ organizations; and are certainly not grassroots, as ministries are often started by missionaries from the West. The danger, therefore, in transferring responsibility to not-so-local organizations is that they may in fact have little idea what host communities want or need, if anything, from short-term teams of foreign volunteers. And *even if* not-so-local organizations *know* what host communities want, they may be unmotivated to implement it if it affects their income (i.e. hosting as many teams as possible).

One final example of mission trip participants evading and transferring responsibility only came up in interviews once, but it demonstrates the theme with such clarity, I chose to include it. Caroline, a white woman with experience on eight mission trips, considered that her trip wasn’t just exceptional from other trips, but that she was exceptional from other people on her team:

As far as Tanzania, I can't speak for everyone, because I really came to the conclusion on my last trip, I was like, *I am not on the same trip as these other people*. Like, it got to this point where I was like: I don't feel like they're being respectful. I don't feel like I can even be—obviously I'm associated with them like, look at me, like, I don't blend in in

¹⁰⁹ “Who We Are,” Youth With A Mission, Accessed May 1, 2021, <https://ywam.org/about-us/>.

Tanzania. *I just felt like there is no way for me to even consider it remotely the same trip*, just like things that they were posting and like all this stuff. [emphasis added]

Caroline didn't only disapprove of the conduct of her fellow team members, but she distanced herself to the point of saying that they weren't 'on the same trip.' This is a stark example of the not-me/not-my-trip mentality of interviewees—a mentality which wasn't discussed in any literature I read. Participants' frequent evasion and transfer of responsibility embody a key norm of whiteness: exceptionalism. Layla Saad defines white exceptionalism, in the context of anti-racism work, as "the belief that you, as a person holding white privilege, are exempt from the effects, benefits, and conditioning of white supremacy."¹¹⁰ In mission trips, voluntourists' exceptionalism coalesces with white exceptionalism to divert critique away from teams and individuals in order to protect systems of violence and dominance already in place.

¹¹⁰ Layla Saad, *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* (Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2020), 67.

Chapter Three: Resisting Systems of Domination

The mission trip industry may be destructive, but it also offers opportunities for participants to resist, if and when they seek those opportunities out. Omi and Winant define anti-racist racial projects as those which “*undo or resist structures of domination based on racial significations and identities*”¹¹¹ [emphasis original]. Although I found limited evidence of participant investment to “undo and resist structures of domination,” participants did challenge racial logics in two ways: within mission trips as individuals, and against the mission trip structure itself. Participants resisted norms of domination by questioning the nature and value of trips and reconsidering their involvement. Moreover, participants tentatively expressed how mission trips interrupted and counteracted racial logics by prompting an interrogation of global disparities and challenging stereotypes. One could argue that categorizing such limited evidence under ‘interruption and counteraction of racial logics’ actually demonstrates how low the bar stands. That may be true, but one goal of this thesis is to consider resistance to existing racialized power structures. In this chapter, therefore, I explore evidence of resistance among mission trip participants.

Dissatisfied with Trip Outcomes

Participants expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the outcome of their mission trip and for a range of reasons. While some dissatisfaction stemmed from unmet volunteer expectations of access to ‘authentic trauma’ or playing ‘expert’ roles in host communities, other dissatisfaction stemmed from unfulfilled expectations about

¹¹¹ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 129.

tangible impact in host communities and/or new awareness of harm. When I asked her what questions she walked away from her volunteer trips asking, Lily said:

I remember going away thinking why didn't we do more? Why didn't we—Yeah, why didn't we do more? Why didn't we spend more money on this? Why did we spend our money in this area? Why did we spend our money buying t-shirts for everyone? When you could even use our money for something else probably more beneficial? You know why? Why do we structure the trip this way? Because majority of the time, I'm just sitting on the site waiting for someone to tell me to put a nail in the wall, because most of the older men don't want me messing up on the house anyway.

There are multiple layers to Lily's frustration: the trip didn't have enough tangible impact, the usage of volunteer funds was ineffective, and she didn't contribute to her full potential (which also has gendered undertones). These culminated in a general dissatisfaction with mission trips which deterred Lily's future involvement. For others, such frustration didn't deter future involvement, but it did make them more critical of the dynamics within mission trips—especially ones involving kids. Chloe talked about concerns she had at the end of her mission:

And just like trying to weigh like the positives versus like the negatives of the impact, because I think there was like a lot of progress made like in building relationships with those kids. And it was like super touching that that we're able to be there for three months. But then like realizing, at the end of the three months when we're leaving, it's like, okay *that hurts a lot for these kids and for us, but like, these kids have to have it like happening to them constantly with like new teams coming in all the time*. And so I think that was like one of the things that kind of made me like open my eyes a bit. [emphasis added]

Interview participants, like Chloe, expressed concern over the emotional and social health of kids and teens in host communities that experience a revolving door of international volunteers. Her concern led her to question whether the positive aspects of mission trips do indeed outweigh the negative aspects.

Very few scholars discuss volunteer dissatisfaction or frustration. Vrasti does note that in both Guatemala and Ghana (where she gathered primary source data) dissatisfaction was not uncommon among volunteers. She writes, “Several other volunteers felt that Ghana would ‘not have fallen apart’ had they not been there” as they were led to believe by voluntourist organizations.¹¹² In Vrasti’s reporting, volunteers were most disillusioned by their minimal or temporary impact in host communities—leading some to stop working at their volunteer sites altogether. Vrasti’s volunteer demographic is meaningfully different from mission trip teams, as she interviewed single volunteers staying at host locations for months to years. This leads to the question: What impact does the mission *team* bear on participants’ ability to question the merit and impact of mission trips? Does collective action result in a collective consciousness? While not a direct answer to the question, I did find that many participants questioned and critiqued their mission trip multiple years after participating, rather than directly afterwards. I will revisit the impact of mission trips’ collective structuring in chapter four on alternative models.

Reevaluation and Critical Reflection Years Later

My interviewee demographic is unique from other research on voluntourism because for my participants, years (and decades for a few) had passed since their first, or even their last, voluntourism experience. Scholars like Schneider, Vrasti, and Bandyopadhyay interviewed volunteers during or directly after their voluntourism experiences, but because my networks derived from my own trips, interviewees often had multiple years separating them from their trips. Consequently, participants reflected

¹¹² Vrasti, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South*, 114.

on how their attitudes had changed over the years. Emma, a white woman who traveled to Mexico and San Francisco, answered a question about how it felt to talk about her mission trips:

Um, I feel guilty in a way. But I don't know. I feel like it's a combination of like, guilty and naiveness of how much I feel like—it felt like I was doing—like we were doing so much more at the time. Like it really felt like we were helping change the world. But I don't know now that I look back at it. Like I definitely feel like we did more harm than good in like most areas...And I feel like it did really just play off like this hierarchy of like: We are so much, we have so much more than these people so like, we need to go to these places and like, share it with them.

Emma relayed that while at the time of the mission trip the impact and benefits seemed certain, after years of reflection she feels ‘guilty’ and believes that we ‘did more harm than good.’ In her critique, she also connected missions to systemic domination by mentioning a ‘hierarchy’ wherein mission teams are the bearers of good gifts to the material-less. Bandyopadhyay and Patil argue that “constructions of the other are actually sites for the consolidation of particular definitions of the self” and moreover that it is “in the process of civilizing, uplifting, saving, and aiding this helpless and oppressed other that the self becomes secured as the source of these gifts.”¹¹³ This is the theoretical critique which Emma alludes to in her reflection.

What makes people pursue a reevaluation of their participation in mission trips? I asked this follow-up question of a few people, and the most common answer involved college peers and/or learning critiques through social media. While a process of reevaluation could affect the future involvement of individual people and/or cultural beliefs about mission trips, it doesn’t change past participation. Therefore, the subsequent question begs: beyond prompting critical reflection in the immediacy or

¹¹³ Bandyopadhyay and Patil, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 649-650.

years later, do mission trips *themselves* offer opportunities to resist systems of domination and challenge racial logics?

Interrogating Global Disparities

Mission trips, in part due to their voyeuristic character, expose participants to global disparities in wealth, infrastructure, and opportunity. Such exposure prompted questioning and some critical engagement with the cause/explanation for such global disparities. Annette talked about her passion to look at systemic issues and pursue long-term solutions in the global South:

I think I probably had questions on long-term solutions, like going down—I really like looking at big pictures. So for me, I'm not as excited about going down and meeting one family's need for one time, you know? So that makes me think: well, geez, what *caused* the problem they had, you know? And me helping one person—I am really grateful I could help one person. *What about the whole system?...Like what's causing this? Is there any way I could influence the things that are causing the problems?* [emphasis added]

Annette wanted to understand more about the social systems that create need and to affect larger-scale change. She particularly wanted to understand the *cause* of problems in other countries—especially referring to poverty.

While questioning disparities between the lived experience of volunteers and the perceived experience of host communities was common among participants, most settled their interrogation by referencing a religious explanation like ‘God’s plan.’

Jordan asked:

Why is there so much disparity in the world? Um like, why does God let his people live, such lavish, like, how does he choose who lives in complete poverty with no shoes, no food, that, and then how does he choose who gets to live in a world where you're comfortable and you have everything that you...And like I know it's part of his story, his plan and like stuff, but it's just like hard to understand.

Jordan considered that God both creates and sustains global wealth disparities. While the theology underpinning such a belief is not the concern of this project, religious explanations ultimately operate to block interrogation of the United States', and more widely, the Western role in creating and sustaining global disparities through colonialism, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism.

In Barbara Heron's analysis of white Canadian development workers (whom she identifies as bourgeois), she considers that their awareness of disparities manifested an obligation to do something. She argues that this is an inherently moral motivation:

Here are white bourgeois subjects seeking to situate themselves in the global context by claiming a common humanity, and wanting to redress injustice on a global scale. In this respect participants' decision to become development workers can and should be read as conscious resistance to social injustice.¹¹⁴

However, she considers that our resistance erodes when participants fail to interrogate how material privilege in the global North exists “*because* others are and historically have been poor, and that this is structured by the intersections of race, class, and gender.”¹¹⁵

Participants' reliance on religious explanations not only operates to rationalize and normalize poverty as part of ‘God’s plan,’ but inhibits understanding of the interdependency of global disparities. On an individual level, such explanations also disconnect one’s own material wealth from the ‘other’s’ material poverty, allowing volunteers to see, touch, and give, and then return from trips with little conviction to examine their own complicity or act. When asked how their mission trip(s) impacted their life, participants most often relayed vague moral improvements like an enriched

¹¹⁴ Heron, *Desire for Development*, 41.

¹¹⁵ Heron, *Desire for Development*, 42.

“perspective” or motivation to be a “better person.” Only four people specifically mentioned continuing financial support to organizations in host communities and no one talked about interrogating racial, economic, or colonial systems at the root of global disparities. Therefore, while mission trips did lead participants to question global inequalities, that questioning proved limited and did not lead to concrete action in most cases.

Challenging Racial Logics

While mission trips can operate to dehumanize, objectify, and racialize others in the global South, some participants relayed that mission trips actually challenged racial ideology, including racial stereotypes, and moved towards Wynter’s “concretely human global, the concretely WE.”¹¹⁶ When asked how her conception of the host community changed over the course of her mission trip, Amanda talked about contesting the racial stereotype that ‘Mexicans are lazy’:

Um, I guess with Mexico, I feel like there's almost this like stigma of like, I'm not saying I believe this because this sounds like really racist, but that Mexicans are just kind of like lazy. And just kind of that—and I wouldn't say I necessarily believe that, because I have Mexican friends who work really hard, but I feel like that is kind of just like a stigma. And then going there, especially with [Fernando] and [Jose], my friends that helped us work or whatever, like they work harder than 90% of Americans. So um I guess even though I didn't really like believe that, it just like proved itself even more.

The two Mexican men who worked alongside Amanda’s mission team cemented for her, counter to a stereotype she’d heard, that Mexicans can and do work hard. In this way, mission trips might provide an opportunity to directly challenge stereotypes by connecting people in unique ways.

¹¹⁶ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 89.

Johnson's article speaks to this topic by asking: can mission trips reduce prejudice through the contact hypothesis? Johnson inquires if mission trips meet the criteria for the contact hypothesis: equal status, common goals, institutional support, absence of competition, sustained contact, intimacy, and voluntary. She ultimately concludes that "short-term mission trips did not create the conditions necessary to reduce prejudice according to the contact hypothesis"¹¹⁷—due to unequal status, dissimilar goals, competition between local and foreign ministry organizations, and temporary contact between volunteers and host communities, as well as doubt about the voluntary nature of interactions and the degree of intimacy achieved.¹¹⁸ Therefore, while some participants discussed counteracting stereotypes, the actual amount of prejudice reduction is difficult, if not impossible to measure, and is likely limited on short-term trips. It should also be noted that individual prejudice is not the core of racism, but racism is the reproduction of systems of domination which ultimately lead to an early death for those differentiated by phenotypical differences—so even if mission trips could reduce prejudice, they wouldn't necessarily be resisting such systems that create and sustain racial oppression in the first place.

Beyond stereotypes, participants also expressed a sense of human kinship, similar to Wynter's vision for a global 'We.' Ted expressed how on his first mission trip he made fun of kids, especially kids with disabilities, in the host community and operated with an us/them mindset, but how that changed over the course of the trip. He said: "And what changed was actually seeing the humaneness in people. What, what changed was, was realizing that I'm, that we're all, on the same level playing field here.

¹¹⁷ Johnson, "Reduce Prejudice?" 10.

¹¹⁸ Johnson, "Reduce Prejudice?" 20-21.

There's no us and them. We're all humans. We're all made in the image of God." While this logic seems to successfully challenge a construction of the inferior non-Western 'other,' it might operate instead to erase race as a significant global construction, and instead paint all humans as the same, without accounting for historic and ongoing violence and oppression—particularly that violence occurring through capitalism, with which Wynter is particularly concerned. Wynter did not advocate for belief in our 'sameness,' but rather an economic and social order that secures justice and equality for all people, and dismantles Western/non-Western conceptions in the process in favor of a global alliance of humanity.

Chapter Four: Conclusion and Alternatives

This project traced white mission trip participants' motivations through Christian institutions and analyzed mission trips as racial projects. I argue that mission trips reproduce systems of racial domination significantly more than they resist them—seen in my research participants' claims of dehumanization, simplification of host issues, lack of qualifications, imitation relationship, lack of training, gendered methods of saviorism, voyeurism, the norm of white bodies, team self-indulgence, and exceptionalism. I found the majority of resistance to be participant resistance *to the mission trip industry itself*, with some evidence that mission trips compel an interrogation of global disparities and challenge racial stereotypes. After establishing the harms embedded in the 'mission trip' variety of voluntourism, the question is: What else? What are the alternatives? This chapter briefly outlines three alternatives and ends with a discussion of refusal—the central claim that while alternatives may offer a replacement model, they are not required nor owed to would-be participants/churches in order to cease organizing, joining, and glorifying mission trips.

First, future research should pursue two main inquiries. The first is research into the resistance and resilience of host communities toward the efforts/presence of volunteer tourists, and especially mission trip teams. As previously noted, research on voluntourism that focuses on the perspectives of host communities is far too limited, and even more absent is any inquiry into resistance in the global South to the dehumanization, encroachments, and systems of domination reproduced in voluntourism. The second direction future research should pursue is inquiry into the institutions—churches, non-profit organizations, for-profit businesses—which facilitate

voluntourism and promote involvement. Research (like mine) often analyzes the individuals involved in voluntourism, but misses the opportunity to focus inquiry on the institutions behind the individuals, and individuals' relationship to such institutions.¹¹⁹

Youth Exchange

The first alternative to the mission trip model of a team from the U.S. traveling to another country (or city) to serve/convert/‘build relationships’ with people in host communities is an *exchange*—particularly one aimed towards youth, since mission trips are popular among young people—that works to build kinship and understanding about the political struggles in different locations. One could envision a group of youth in two different places who are connected through an organization or religious institution and spend a week or more visiting the other group, introducing each other to their own language, culture, history, and political struggles for justice. An exchange is inherently mutual, with the two groups acting as both hosts and guests. To encourage even more mutuality, the two groups could fundraise into a communal pot of money to finance the visits—equalizing access between youth with more funds and youth with less. Youth could stay with one another’s families, visit one another’s schools and places of worship, and pursue community service projects together. Prior to trips, the teams of youth could go through cultural and social-justice-oriented training to untangle the legacies of colonialism, white supremacy, and the disparities they might encounter during the experience. Such an exchange would also encourage a more sustainable form of relationship, because the youth would meet at least twice and would be the same age, so as to form real bonds of friendship.

¹¹⁹ Called for in Tuck and Yang, “Unbecoming Claims,” 815.

This idea for a youth exchange came from two interviews where participants talked about similar ideas. Rose, a white woman who traveled to Guatemala four times, talked about how her mission team paired-up with a group of Guatemalan high schoolers:

That was actually probably my favorite part because, so I went four times, and each year it was like the group of Guatemalan kids that we were meeting with would change a little bit, but they were all also like, teenagers, just like I was. And so interestingly enough, like we followed each other on Instagram, and like we are kind of like, we are actually friends now, which is like, kind of crazy. But yeah, we would work with them. And honestly, like just bouncing ideas off of each other. And it helped because they knew a little bit more about, like, what would be—what would come across well, and what wouldn't...But yeah, we worked with them the whole time. We lived with them the whole time. Yeah, we were together the entire time.

Rose expressed the significance that the group of Guatemalan youth were the same age as her so they ‘actually [became] friends.’ She also recognized the benefit of working alongside people with knowledge on the culture and language. Ultimately, Rose considered working alongside the group of Guatemalan youth her ‘favorite part’ of the mission trip. This spurred the idea for mutuality and connection between youth participating in mission trips and youth in host communities. However, Rose didn’t mention reciprocity in visits; the white Western youth were the only ones who got to travel. Caroline, on the other hand, did talk about a method of volunteer travel that included exchange. She said:

And like my friend did a program where—that I really admired—where they had like, kind of like VBS, but instead of like doing the VBS in Puerto Rico, they did an exchange and they had—they paid for Puerto Rican high schoolers and college students to come do the VBS for their kids in Indiana. So I think more programs—obviously there are problems with every single one, but I think more things where we’re really focused on cultural exchange and not cultural like telling of our own.

More people in my study recognized that the one-way nature of mission trips is not the only, or even the best method. Caroline's friend participated in a trip that invited youth and young adults from Puerto Rico to visit their community in Indiana and help lead a VBS. If education and reciprocity was added to such a program, it might create the conditions for even more learning and growth in youth from both communities. Most significantly perhaps, an exchange would allow both parties to lead and be led, to host and be guests, to discover and teach, to be culturally comfortable and uncomfortable, and to travel and stay home—to be peers, invested in the communities and lives of one another.

Learning Trip

Rafia Zakaria concludes his article critically assessing voluntourism with the following assertion: “Despite its flaws, the educational aspect of voluntourism’s cross-cultural exchange must be saved, made better instead of being rejected completely.”¹²⁰ Zakaria considers that voluntourism offers a crucial opportunity for education and expresses a desire to preserve that element. Likewise, in my study, one interview participant described a type of mission trip wherein learning was the primary goal. Laurel, a white woman, talked about her experience on what she called ‘youth trips,’ but I also refer to as learning trips. Laurel explained that her church explicitly tried to avoid the ‘mission trip’ model due to its colonial associations. All of her youth trips were domestic and related to different social justice topics: Indigenous justice at a Native American reservation, LGBTQ rights in San Francisco, and immigrant rights in Texas. She saw the goal of the trips as “[bringing] students together to learn about

¹²⁰ Zakaria, “The white tourist’s burden.”

various issues of injustice and...connect them with people who were on the ground, really involved in social justice movements in various communities across the U.S."

Youth learning trips are differentiated from mission trips by an emphasis on learning rather than service, extensive preparation, and take-home action items

As indicated in the name, learning trips emphasize participant learning rather than service. Laurel talked about how her group spent the bulk of their time learning from Indigenous educators, non-profit organizations, community leaders, and grassroots activists—paying them for their time and education. She remembers that the trips intended:

not to replicate so many of the very, the most egregious harms of traditional mission trips. You know that it was an anti-evangelical. You are learning from the folks here. You have nothing to teach them. You are here to learn. And we owe them money, we owe them service, we owe them our time for this education.

While Laurel later reflected on possible fallacies in trying to ‘adequately compensate’ educators, she considered learning an important aspect of the trips.

Another distinguishing element of learning trips is extensive pre-departure training. In listing the different articles, videos, and documentaries she read/watched prior to one trip, Laurel touched on Indigenous communities and culture, the history of Spanish and American colonization, the racialization of Native Americans, background on the U.S. immigration system, and more. In some ways, participants in learning trips pursued reflexivity—situating themselves within systems of domination through preparation and training. Rieger expresses a version of this need for reflexivity in the mission trip industry under his proposed alternative called “mission as inreach,” rather than ‘outreach.’ He says that:

Before we can become part of the solution, we need to develop a self-critical attitude that helps us reflect on how we have come to be (and still are) part of the problem. Mission as inreach leads us to a new look at ourselves, at our interconnectedness with others, which includes an awareness of how the suffering of others is related, inversely, to our success.¹²¹

Extensive preparation may create the conditions ripe to understand our role in perpetuating suffering and lead to action for a more just society.

Learning trips still risk reproducing voyeuristic tendencies as well as volunteer team indulgence, however. Laurel's group did pursue some post-trip actions like raising money for organizations and lobbying for legislation, but the core outcome of the trip was the enrichment of the participating youth. Laurel admitted herself that while the learning trips aimed to be different from traditional mission trips, they still used the "pattern of picking up privileged kids from one community, implanting them into another community so that they may learn and grow as people, and then instantly removing them and replacing them back to their privileged communities." While learning trips are bolstered by preparation and post-trip action, they still stand to replicate the pattern whereby one group benefits while giving relatively little back, which should cause hesitation. Moreover, because conversion is not part of learning trips, they might not satisfy participants' motivation to fulfill the 'great commission,' as they understand it. Christian communities might also see deemphasizing service as betraying the fundamental purpose of mission trips. However, diminishing or eliminating service might allow for more genuine and equal engagement—positioning participants not as givers but as learners/receivers.

¹²¹ Rieger, "Theology and Mission," 221.

Not-Volunteer Tourism

For voluntourism participants whose main motivation is seeing new parts of the world, meeting new people, and experiencing new cultures, non-volunteer related tourism might prove just as fulfilling and ultimately pose less harm. While this project didn't report on participants' motivation to travel, interviewees did talk about travel as a central draw, and other scholarship has widely identified travel as a common motivation among voluntourists.¹²² Caroline talked about how she was primarily drawn to mission trips because she saw it as her "avenue to travel" in high school. While she now knows about non-missional programs that facilitate youth travel (like those at the State Department), she said:

I just had no idea about them because I grew up in a Christian circle and I also grew up in Oregon, where your high schools don't teach you about State Department programs that sponsor high schoolers to go to things, which I would have loved those kind of programs.

For Caroline, mission trips seemed the only feasible chance to leave the country—her main goal. But had she known about other opportunities for youth to travel, she may have chosen those types of trips instead.

Another interview participant, Anna, talked about how she and her family did choose travel over mission trips. Anna first talked about going on a mission trip when she was a kid, but the conversation developed into a discussion about her family's leisure travel to visit friends in Nicaragua. She juxtaposed her family's experience traveling with mission trip teams:

So this is like, kind of unrelated again, but I would travel with my family a lot to Nicaragua for like personal reasons, like we had friends who lived there so like we like we would go to like visit like for fun. And like

¹²² Wearing and McGehee, "Volunteer Tourism," 123.

almost every time we went there, there was this like huge mission group. And they all had like matching t-shirts, and they were like always on our planes. And we kind of made fun of them because we like knew that they weren't actually going to do much.

Anna's family visited Nicaragua at least annually to see their friends, and oftentimes found themselves traveling alongside large groups of voluntourists, identified by their matching t-shirts. Her family objected to the mission teams' presence, believing that they weren't 'going to do much.' Anna and her family prioritized exploring a new culture and building relationship with friends in Nicaragua—and they didn't need voluntourism to do that. While tourism is by no means a new idea, I mention it here because some mission trip participants seemed to forget that it's an option.

The obvious difference between tourism and voluntourism is volunteer service. International volunteer service so commonly prompts overwhelming praise and admiration that one must consider that to remove the 'service' transforms the social feedback. Vrasti points this out: "Because volunteer tourism is thought to be a spontaneous act of kindness in response to other people's needs and suffering, it becomes a standard of reference for what it means to be good, ascribing value (in the form of human and social capital) to anyone involved in this practice."¹²³ Vrasti says that voluntourism stands on "suspiciously firm moral grounding that *demands* applause" from educators, employers, parents, and peers.¹²⁴ While I consider that cultural beliefs about voluntourism are changing, the social 'applause' volunteers receive might dissuade them from choosing normal tourism.

¹²³ Vrasti, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South*, 4.

¹²⁴ Vrasti, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South*, 4.

Ultimately, even if voluntourists switched to other modes of intercultural engagement, how could tourism mitigate the reproduction of systems of domination better than voluntourism? If done independently, and not with Christian community, tourism might allow participants more opportunities for critical reflection without the influence of a collective consciousness. As discussed in chapter three, many participants critiqued their involvement in mission trips multiple years afterward rather than in the moment. How might eliminating the buffer/feedback-loop of a similarly-positioned group of people enable travelers to assess their engagement with local communities more critically? Moreover, tourism might mitigate the pitfalls of voyeurism, as tourists usually don't visit orphanages, red light districts, soup kitchens, and disability centers—but visit natural wonders, cultural centers, museums, markets, amusement parks, and more. In other words, tourists don't only seek out sites of deprivation, but also (and more often) seek sites of fun and wonder. Tourism could also mitigate saviorism because tourists are not going to ‘help,’ but to enjoy, meet, and learn. These are just a few examples of how tourism might resist the reproduction of racial domination better than voluntourism.

That said, there is a strong argument to be made that tourism in any form caters to the Western ‘norm of man’ and reinforces his superiority over the non-Western man. Vrasti explains how scholarship on tourism has always grappled with the reality that travel from the global North to the global South allows travelers to “assert their autonomy, magnanimity and superiority over the backward locals and the less educated and mobile working classes at home” and concludes that “Tourism, whether during colonial or contemporary times, whether done with the blessing of empire or for

charitable reasons, has always been fraught with Orientalist sensibilities.”¹²⁵ Tourism studies continues to contend with the ‘orientalist sensibilities’ imbedded in tourism in an ongoing and manifold conversation—much too large to tease out here, but worthy of further investigation and contrasting with voluntourism.

Refusal

When asked if they would participate in another mission trip, very few interviewees took an unconditional refusal stance. Oftentimes, participants offered conditions on their future involvement, like going with a trustworthy organization and doing more preparation/training, or responded with enthusiasm at the prospect of participating in another mission trip.

What is refusal to participate in mission trips, and why might we embrace it? In her final reflections on the merits of mission trips, Lily said:

I think that a lot more education probably could have helped. I think especially education on culture and language probably could have helped. But I think that—I don't know. It's such a hard one. I I—sometimes I think that it's just better to like just skip it, rather than try and alter it.

Lily’s sense that the best choice might be to ‘skip it’ (referring to mission trips) rather than ‘alter it’ is a sentiment of refusal. Refusal is simply to choose *not* to go on the mission trip.

This refusal non-alternative is inspired by Tuck and Yang’s call for refusal stances in research, as discussed earlier (see the methodology section). While the word is contextualized differently in Tuck and Yang’s article: “Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research,” it serves a similar goal: to resist “settler

¹²⁵ Vrasti, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South*, 10.

colonialism.”¹²⁶ They examine refusal as an analytical practice one employs throughout the research process from topic choice to claim-making. Tuck and Yang propose three truths about social science research that necessitate refusal: (1) “*The subaltern can speak, but is only invited to speak her/our pain*” (2) “*There are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve*” and (3) “*Research may not be the intervention that is needed.*”¹²⁷ I propose that these can be applied to mission trips, and voluntourism more generally: (1) Non-western host communities can exist, but only via their deprivation, trauma, and poverty to juxtapose the ‘WE’ (2) There are some places that volunteers/tourists aren’t invited (3) Volunteer tourism may not be the intervention that is needed. These, or similar ones, might frame a refusal stance.

After unearthing such dehumanization and domination in mission trips, refusal gives us the chance to discontinue our participation. However, Tuck and Yang say that refusal is “not just a no, but is a generative, analytic practice.”¹²⁸ Therefore, voluntourist refusal is not just personal cessation, but an active and visible resistance and untangling of such dehumanization and domination. Perhaps lobbying for different Christian community activities than mission trips, perhaps connecting with and supporting grassroots work in countries into which we voyaged, perhaps interrogating racial projects at home and abroad. Refusal is a “no and...” stance.

How might Christians take a stance of refusal in the face of ‘God’s call’ to mission work? As Ted insisted: “I’m not married to the method, but I am married to the

¹²⁶ Tuck and Yang, “Unbecoming Claims,” 811.

¹²⁷ Tuck and Yang, “Unbecoming Claims,” 813.

¹²⁸ Tuck and Yang, “Unbecoming Claims,” 817.

call.” Rieger, a professor of theology, while not teaching refusal directly, does say at the end of his article on mission trips and colonialism/neocolonialism:

Mission, and the theological authority it claims, has often been just as self-centered as the colonial/neocolonial system. It has failed to take other people seriously, and thus it has often ended up supporting conquest and exploitation. The consequence has been a severe distortion and perversion of both mission and theology: Missing the reality of other people, we have also missed the reality of God (see Rieger 2001). Failing to respect others—celebrating our own power over others—we have also failed to respect the divine Other, and replaced God with our own authority.¹²⁹

Rieger considers that mission trips *distort* the truth about God and *disrespect* God in other people. That we have even gone so far as to ‘[replace] God with our own authority’ through the reproduction of colonialism (and I would add racial domination) in mission. Thus, can we really assert that ‘God’s call’ necessarily leads to mission trips? Perhaps we would find that ‘God’s call’ is at once more just and more divine than we imagined.

¹²⁹ Rieger, “Theology and Mission,” 223-224.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions for Research Participants

- 1) What's your name? Tell me about yourself, what are you doing in life right now?
- 2) How do you identify your gender and your race? How would you describe your religious beliefs?
- 3) How long have you been a part of [religion]? How important are your religious beliefs to you (i.e. how big a role do they play in your daily life)?
- 4) Have you ever gone on a mission trip, service trip, or volunteer trip? Where did you go and when?
- 5) Would you tell me about your trip as if I was someone unfamiliar with mission trips? What types of activities or volunteer work did you do on your volunteer trip? How long did you stay? Who all went on the trip?
- 6) Was your volunteer trip religiously affiliated? Do you remember participating in any religious activities while volunteering?
- 7) What motivated you to join the mission trip(s)? Why do you think those motivations were so compelling to you at the time? What values can you identify as underpinning those motivations?
- 8) What did you know about the culture in which you volunteered prior to traveling? How much of the language did you know prior to your travel?
- 9) Prior to traveling, what did you think the local people would be like? How did that change after your trip?
- 10) What training, if any, do you remember receiving about cultural competency or responsible traveling etiquette? What training, if any, do you remember receiving about the history of the country to which you traveled, especially in relation to the history of that country and the United States?
- 11) What was a memorable part of your trip? Can you remember something that made you go: "Oh this was totally worth all the fundraising and effort to get here"?
- 12) What response did you receive from family and friends about your decision to join a mission trip?
- 13) What impacts, if any, do you consider your mission trip had on the community(ies) you visited, both positive and negative?
- 14) What impact did your mission trip have on your own life/identity?
- 15) What kinds of questions did you walk away from your trip with (maybe about the efficiency of mission trips, the nature of mission trips, the culture in the communities you visited, or others)?
- 16) At the time of your travel, had you heard criticisms of mission trips before? What had you heard people criticize? How did you contend with those criticisms?
- 17) What emotions come up for you when you talk about your time volunteering abroad?
- 18) Would you participate in another mission trip similar to the one(s) you talked about?
- 19) Is there anything else you'd like to share? Are there any other questions that I didn't ask, that you think I should be asking for my research?

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