VOLUNTEER TOURISM IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Giving back in neoliberal times

WANDA VRASTI

Volunteer Tourism in the Global South

This book explores the increasingly popular phenomenon of volunteer tourism in the Global South, paying particular attention to the governmental rationalities and socio-economic conditions that valorize it as a noble and necessary cultural practice.

Combining theoretical research with primary data gathered during volunteering programmes in Guatemala and Ghana, the author argues that although volunteer tourism may not trigger social change, provide meaningful encounters with difference, or offer professional expertise, as the brochure discourse and the scholarly literature on tourism and hospitality often promises, the formula remains a useful strategy for producing the subjects and social relations neoliberalism requires. Vrasti suggests that the value of volunteer tourism should not to be assessed in terms of the goods and services it delivers to the global poor, but in terms of how well the practice disseminates entrepreneurial styles of feeling and action. Analyzing the key effects of volunteer tourism, it is demonstrated that far from being a selfless and history-less rescue act, volunteer tourism is in fact a strategy of power that extends economic rationality, particularly its emphasis on entrepreneurship and competition, to the realm of political subjectivity.

Volunteer Tourism in the Global South provides a unique and innovative analysis of the relationship between the political and personal dimensions of volunteer tourism and will be of great interest to scholars and students of international relations, cultural geography, tourism and development studies.

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Preface

The story behind this book is a personal one. The summer after I earned my Masters degree I went on a backpacking trip to Morocco. It was the first time I ventured beyond the familiar surroundings of the Western world. Fresh out of courses on post-structural and postcolonial theory and heavily equipped with a critical awareness of the importance of difference and 'letting subaltern voices speak', I was hoping for a transformative tourist encounter that would neither be tainted by colonial residues nor give in to lofty liberal aspirations. What happened instead was I became, in the words of Jamaica Kincaid, an ugly person, tired, angry and frustrated. In the three weeks I spent trekking down the Moroccan coast I was repeatedly hassled, mocked, scammed, stared and shouted at. I resented being treated like a walking dollar sign or a sex object. But, instead of approaching these tensions with light-hearted tolerance and sympathy, like most of the other Western backpackers I met, I chose to retaliate: I refused to give up on my Western dress (to the chagrin of many local bus and cab drivers), became distrustful of local men and haggled for minuscule sums of money that I could have easily done without. I realized then that I had no idea how to engage with locals beyond the protocols of cultural relativism and political correctness. The brand of critical theory I picked up in graduate school taught me quite well that neither multiculturalism, with its apolitical celebration of cultural diversity, nor modernism, with its insistence on universal (read: European) values of progress, rationality and civility, could be satisfactory models for an ethical encounter with difference. What critical theory did not teach me was how to resolve the heightened contradictions and traumatic encounters tourism threw in my face. All these theories and the traumas kept piling up!

It was during this trip that I first learned about volunteer tourism – a steadily growing sector of the tourism industry directed mostly at young adults (ages 18–25) looking to spend their holidays doing charitable work in impoverished parts of the world. I knew right away that this research topic could supply the kind of passion and curiosity needed to push through a PhD course. It had clear affinities with questions that had preoccupied me since the beginning of my graduate studies, questions regarding colonialism, cosmopolitanism, modern narratives of labour and leisure, neoliberal strategies of government, post-Fordist

transformations of work and flexible citizenship practices. Plus, it would allow me to make sense of my own nervous conditions surrounding touristic forms of encounter. This is not to say that I did not have my reservations, even outright revulsion, concerning volunteer tourism. I was particularly suspicious of the anti-modernist fantasies of localism and traditionalism that motivated volunteers to pay exorbitant sums of money to 'make a difference' in the lives of the global poor. There was something disturbing about the moral consensus surrounding charitable and multicultural sensibilities in advanced liberal democracies that I could not quite put my finger on, but which I wanted to explore in more detail. While most of these gut reactions did not prove to be wrong, they did become more theoretically sophisticated. In the three years I spent alternately doing volunteer work in the Global South and writing about it, it never ceased to amaze me that this relatively minor practice repeatedly unsettled both the theories I was trained in and the politics I believed in. Though I do not offer a firm answer as to whether people should enrol in volunteering trips or give advice about how tourists can ethically engage cultural difference, I hope those who read this book will at least be mesmerized by the complex snapshot volunteer tourism provides of the tensions and contradictions of the times we live in.

1   Introduction

The history of volunteer tourism (short 'voluntourism') is older than the term suggests. As a commercial practice volunteer tourism only gained currency over the past couple of decades, but 'the idea of combining voluntary service with travel' (voluntourism.org) is far from new. While its institutional roots can be found in the British Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) established in 1958 and the US Peace Corps set up in 1961, the first organizations to send private citizens to the Third World for 'unofficial' aid and development work, the desire to explore the frontier of industrial modernity for charity and self-betterment is older. It can be traced back to the itineraries of colonial missionaries and educators as well as the nineteenth-century Grand Tour, which I will have more to say about later. But whereas these practices were informed by thinly veiled imperialist motivations and Eurocentric beliefs, volunteer tourism espouses a more recent cosmopolitan vision, reflected also in the rise of sustainable tourism, corporate social responsibility and ethical consumption over the past few decades. Underlying volunteer tourism is a multiculturalist appreciation for cultural diversity, a romantic reverence for nature and tradition and what seems to be a genuine desire to help but also learn from other cultures and people. On top of these noble sensibilities, volunteer tourism also benefits from being anchored in the latest (post-Fordist) forms of education and production, such as study abroad initiatives, continuing education, mandatory service programmes and internships. All of these help make this holiday option seem like sensible investment in the future. So while the idea of volunteer tourism is not unprecedented, its adaptation to contemporary emotional regimes and economic injunctions grants this combination of tourism and aid work unprecedented popularity and profit.

For the first time, during the 1990s, overseas charity work was packaged as an all-inclusive commodity and sold off to conscious consumers (mostly young adults aged 18–25) through travel agencies, for-profit organizations and educational institutions. With 1.6 million participants per year, volunteer tourism is quickly becoming the fastest growing sector of the travel industry (Guttentag 2009: 538). A Travelocity poll from 2007 predicted that the number of Americans planning to take volunteering trips abroad over the next couple of years would increase from 6 per cent to 11 per cent. The Travel Industry

Association of America (TIA) is even more confident, forecasting a 28 per cent rise in demand as far back as 2006 (Dalton 2008). In the UK, where the gap year is a far more institutionalized rite of passage, a University of London review from 2004 counted as many as 800 organizations offering volunteering services abroad (Ward 2007). Although not all volunteer tourism providers are for-profit, travel titans such as Travelocity, Cheaptickets, First Choice Holidays, GAP Adventures and Travel Cuts have recently jumped on board, crowding out or joining forces with not-for-profit organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity and United Way (Dalton 2008).

Volunteer tourism in the developing world, which is the focus of this study, represents only a fraction of the gap year industry: it accounts for 10,000 participants a year and rising (Simpson 2005: 448). Although reliable statistics on for-profit voluntourism in the Global South are painfully absent (the few that exist offer widely dissimilar figures and should, therefore, be viewed with caution), there can be no doubt about the rising popularity of this trend (Guttentag 2009: 538). No longer is overseas charitable work limited to eccentric dropouts, skilled humanitarian personnel and state-sanctioned development initiatives. Middle-class young adults from Western countries, eager 'to undertake holidays that might involve … alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment' (Wearing 2001: 1), now has a variety of organizations, placements and destinations to choose from.

At first glance, there are at least two possible explanations for the growing popular success and moral appeal of this form of travel. First, volunteer tourism presents itself as an alternative to and critique of mass tourism and its notoriously destructive effects. Phrases like 'giving back to the community' and 'making a difference in the world' that litter the brochure discourse are meant to tickle the post-materialist and anti-modernist sensibilities of the Western ethical consumer looking to demonstrate their superior social capital by 'travelling with a purpose'. In addition, the institutionalization and professionalization of this practice have turned volunteer tourism into a 'standard requirement for higher education and career development' (Simpson 2005: 448). For students and young graduates eager to distinguish themselves in an increasingly precarious and competitive economic climate, the promise of gaining exotic cultural knowledge and professional expertise outside of the classroom is particularly relevant.

As we shall see, there is ample evidence for both interpretations throughout this book, but these stories alone cannot explain the root of this seduction. We still need to ask: where does this yearning for travelling with a (humanitarian) purpose come from? Why is an escape from modern society pleasurable and even desirable? What is it about the present moment that requires individuals, especially young adults, to organize their lives, even their spare time, around imperatives of cosmopolitan sensibilities and personal responsibility? And why have these imperatives become shorthand for entrepreneurial action expected from good neoliberal subjects? Together, these questions betray a deeper curiosity

about the kinds of political subjects and social relations volunteer tourism produces and about whether these consolidate or deviate from already existing formations of power. The approach adopted in this book combines the typically Foucauldian preoccupation with subject formation with a more Marxian inquiry into the duplicitous effects of self-making. It pays special attention to the ways in which even the most well-intentioned attempts at making ourselves into 'the moral subjects of our own actions' (Foucault cited in Nelson 2009: 130) can be used to strengthen the logic of capital. At the same time, the question resonates with the postcolonial critique of Orientalist forms of representation and cultural fantasies that allow some people to affirm their sense of self by taking a detour through other people's version of everyday life.

I knew from the very beginning of this project that I did not want to treat volunteer tourism as a sub-section of the tourism industry. I did not want to provide a technical assessment of the effectiveness of volunteer tourism or formulate recommendations for enhancing the day-to-day operations of volun-tourism organizations. Static approaches such as these are responsible for most of the lifeless sociological analyses that currently dominate the field of tourism studies (Franklin and Crang 2001; Hutnyk 2006, 2007). It was also not my ambition to unveil the hidden motives or underlying nature of individual volunteers. The question of whether volunteers are hypocritical or selfless figures lies in the territory of social psychology and does not concern me. Whether volunteers believe in the normative desirability of their actions (which I believe most of them do) or participate solely to boost their résumés does not do anything to change the fact that this practice carries with it a certain moral and material weight. The approach I have chosen instead situates the increasingly popular phenomenon of volunteering in the Global South at the intersection between subjectivity, biopolitics and capital in neoliberal governmentality. It uses volunteer tourism as an opportunity to explore what about the present moment requires individuals, especially young adults, 'to bring [themselves] to labour in an enterprising fashion' (Kiersey 2009: 381), and why this ethos of entrepreneurship relies in equal measure upon economic rationalizations and emotional dictums.

Drawing upon ethnographic material gathered during two volunteering programs in Guatemala and Ghana, I argue that, notwithstanding its practical and ethical deficiencies, volunteer tourism is not a bait and switch strategy that tricks volunteers into paying large sums of money with nothing to offer in return. Even if voluntourism does not result in the kinds of social change, authentic encounters with difference and professional expertise volunteers are led to expect (and enticed to purchase), even if volunteers constantly complain about 'not feeling needed' either because the local population is not 'poor enough' to require foreign assistance or their placements are not well-structured enough to endow them with any meaningful work experience, volunteer tourism still fulfils its promise in different ways. Whether it is by allowing tourists to demonstrate their superior social capital through ethical forms of consumption (as was the case in Guatemala) or by helping them

develop various affective and entrepreneurial competencies needed to navigate the challenges of flexible capital (as in Ghana), volunteer tourism helps young adults from the Global North assume a type of political subjectivity that, in its fidelity to neoliberal injunctions, embodies a new normative ideal. In other words, the effectiveness of volunteer tourism should not to be assessed in terms of the goods and services it delivers to the global poor or the emancipatory alternative it presents to liberal modernity, but in terms of how well it helps (re)produce subjects and social relations congruent with the logic of capital in seemingly laudable and pleasurable ways.

To take issue with a model of action so seeped in noble intentions and transformative ambitions may seem like a callous, even misanthropic gesture. (As someone once said to me after I had explained the subject of my dissertation: 'Your thesis is mean'.) 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. Stories about building houses in Latin America or distributing medical supplies in Africa have come to occupy a (suspiciously) firm moral grounding that *demands* applause. But it is precisely because voluntourism enjoys such unabashed support that we should interrogate its claims, strategies and ambitions. In other words, it is less the novelty or magnitude of volunteer tourism that should trouble us, but the virtuous place it occupies in our collective imaginary, from self-righteous participants, enthusiastic parents, educators, employers, all the way to the congratulatory coverage in popular and scholarly publications. This line of inquiry goes back to critical theory's original intent, which is not about providing expert solutions to predetermined problems (such as, how to address the technical problems of voluntourism to make this a more transparent and accountable industry) but about interrogating our received notions of order, progress and justice together with the power relations that allow them to pass as normative truth (Foucault 1980; Cox 1983).

In what follows I offer an introduction to this project and the study of volunteer tourism in general, starting with a review of the literature, a section on ethnographic methods, some preliminary thoughts on theory, a note on the contribution to international relations research and finally a chapter outline of the book.

The seductions and discontents of volunteer tourism

None of the conclusions about volunteer tourism I advance in this book were apparent from the start. I meandered through promotional literature, scholarly apologias and critiques of volunteer tourism as well as ethnographic surprises, theoretical reflections and several editing stages. My initial thoughts about volunteer tourism were shaped by the brochure discourse, in particular voluntourism.org, a sprawling web platform meant to 'educate, empower and engage' tourists, NGOs, tour operators, communities and corporations to embrace this practice. Volunteer tourism, the website boasts,

represents the blending of your favourite passions and, perhaps, pastimes. History, culture, geography, environment and the recreation of exploration meet the inspiration of your voluntary efforts in serving a destination and its residents. Body, mind and soul respond to the awakening of thoughts, feelings, emotions, via a labour of gratitude that is offered as a part of your overall itinerary. VolunTourism provides you with perspective and balance. You are able to utilize your 'six' senses and interact with your destination in ways that had previously existed beyond your capacity of expectation. This is travel that unites your purpose and passion and ignites your enthusiasm in ways unimaginable.

(Clemmons 2009)

According to the website, volunteer tourism contains benefits for all stakeholders involved: it allows tourists to travel beyond 'the boundaries of the brochure', host communities to share their cultural richness with others, NGOs to generate revenue in a sustainable way, tour operators to differentiate their product in a 'responsible' manner, hotels and suppliers to 'green' their operations and reduce costs, corporations to demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility, build employee morale and provide innovative training for their staff and educators to enhance their classroom experience. Volunteer tourism offers something for everyone. It is a win-win situation, for volunteers especially, who get to explore new depths of their own personas while making a charitable contribution to the world. For the first time, the personal and the global, the pleasurable and the altruistic and 'the joy and fulfilment associated with them, [can] be synergized and harmoniously blended into one consumable opportunity' (ibid.).

The Lonely Planet guide *Volunteer: A Traveller's Guide to Making a Difference Around the World* (2007) adopts a slightly more tempered tone. Well-aware of the common charge that voluntourism is 'part of a long tradition of people from the West setting off to help or change the countries of the Global South and have adventures while they do it', the Lonely Planet authors stress the continued need for individual responsibility. '[W]hether international volunteering is the new colonialism or not is, in large part, down to the attitudes of you, the volunteer and the organization you go with' (ibid.: 10), which is why the book spends much of its time charting the vast and somewhat confusing spectrum of volunteer organizations to help readers pick not only the most 'responsible' tour provider but also the best-suited placement for their personality. Still, time and time again it is made clear that the success of the experience depends on 'personal attitude'. Volunteers are encouraged to show open-mindedness and humility towards local culture and people. They should acknowledge that, although voluntourism implies a commitment to humanitarian aid and assistance, host communities are not passive recipients of foreign altruism, but also have a lot to offer in terms of cultural wisdom, foreign languages, technical skills and exotic adventures. Being grateful for their hospitality and respectful of their culture can go a long way to ensure that volunteer tourism remains an equitable encounter.

The growing scholarly literature on volunteer tourism coming out of leisure and hospitality studies oscillates between these two options: it is either openly celebratory of the transformative potential of volunteer tourism or it claims that this potential, even if not entirely altruistic, can be realized with some minor technical adjustments. As Wearing and Neil put it: 'Living in and learning about other people and cultures, in an environment of mutual benefit and cooperation, a person is able to engage in a transformation and development of the self' (2001: 242). Overseas volunteering is understood as a morally admirable encounter between hosts and guests that breaks with the vacuity of mass tourism to foster cultural exchange, social transformation and personal development (Wearing 2001, 2002; McGehee and Santos 2005; Wearing *et al*. 2008). There is now also a growing number of empirical case studies dealing with the 'mutually beneficial' impact of volunteer tourism in Australia (Higgins-Desbiolles 2009), Thailand (Broad 2003), Indonesia (Galley and Clifton 2004), South Africa (Stoddart and Rogerson 2004), Costa Rica (Campbell and Smith 2006) and Latin America (Söderman and Snead 2008) to confirm these exuberant conclusions. Even in those rare instances when leisure and hospitality scholars notice the structural inequality foundational to voluntourism, they insist that with better industry regulations in place this problem can be smoothened out. Invariably, the commitment behind this research is to fine-tune the tourism industry by making volunteer organizations more accountable and sustainable, designing more effective placements, taking into account local needs and priorities, increasing the transparency of payment schemes and improving industry credibility (Guttentag 2009; CBC Radio One 2009). It rarely questions the ethico-political rationalities that make overseas volunteering necessary and valuable in liberal capitalist societies.

There are both disciplinary and technical reasons for this limited understanding of voluntourism. On the disciplinary front, international volunteering restores the field's confidence in the transformative powers of travel, allowing management and hospitality studies to continue its unholy alliance with the tourism industry. On the technical front, the discipline's behavioural orientation precludes any serious engagement with the political implications and subjective complexities of volunteer tourism.

Package tourists have long been ridiculed as self-absorbed, hedonistic masses, with no understanding of local culture, no consideration for natural surroundings and no individuality beyond that which is sold to them through advertising and mass consumption (Butcher 2003). Especially in anthropology and sociology, which have made a business out of disparaging this type of travel (Crick 1989), mass tourism is considered a sad statement on modern existence. Dean MacCannell (1973), the cheerleader of tourism sociology, for instance, explains that while the ambition of modern mass tourism is to give people access to the 'backstage', an unedited version of local everyday life, so as to help them make up for the alienated condition of modern life, in reality all tourists get to see is a *mise-en-scène* of local culture. The inaccessibility or constant deferral of authenticity in tourism is indicative of a larger semiotic

aporia: for something to be perceived as authentic it must be marked as such; yet, in this act of marking, the real is instantly pushed further into the distance, never to be reached (Frow 1997). It also speaks to a programmatic difficulty in tourism: local tourism providers often willingly refuse to invite their customers to the 'backstage' as a way of resisting the complete commodification of local life forms. All in all, conventional travel seems to be better at mirroring the afflictions of Western modernity (the sense of historical decline, personal fragmentation, moral disintegration and loss of personal freedom) than at alleviating them (ibid.: 80).

Compared to mass tourists, who constantly fall for these tricks, volunteer tourists (or responsible tourists in general) are savvy, resourceful, sophisticated, cultured, sensitive, spontaneous, adventurous and creative (Butcher 2003: 21–22). In making the eradication of global poverty and environmental degradation their *raison d'être*, volunteer tourists avoid the disappointments of mass tourism and recover a sense of purpose and personal meaning. In choosing intimate cultural encounters over manufactured tourist experiences, they critique the conformism of modern society and the homogenizing effects of globalization. Instead of mass consumption, all-inclusive resorts and ecological destruction, they turn to the rural, authentic, unspoiled, traditional and non-Western other for spiritual regeneration and self-critique. Volunteering gives these tourists access to what mass tourism always aspired to but never delivered: an unedited version of other people's version of the everyday, an Eden lost to the West in the process of modernization (MacCannell 1973; Cohen 1979; Badone 2004; Bruner 2005). In volunteer tourism, the disease, poverty and pollution afflicting the Global South are not hidden from sight. On the contrary, these 'disturbing' realities are what constitute a large part of the appeal and justify the cost of volunteering trips, which can be two or three times the value of classic relax-and-escape packages (Ward 2007). Because overseas volunteering is a small-scale, low-impact form of travel that places community development above profit making, Western tourists (who can afford the trip) are given the opportunity to overcome the proverbial modern alienation and apathy by 'making a difference' in the lives of local people (Wearing 2001).

Volunteer tourism also impresses through its promise to resuscitate the nineteenth-century ideals of the Grand Tour where genteel young men embarked on long exploratory trips as part of their studies. The purpose of the Grand Tour was one of education, exploration and sensibilization to the manifold realities of a growingly interconnected world. It was also a way for young men from the upper classes to gain social status and demonstrate a certain sense of maturity and masculinity (Wearing 2002: 243). While modern-day successors of the Grand Tour traveller still exist (backpackers, nomads, pilgrims, drifters and dropouts), mass tourism, beginning with Thomas Cook's pioneering efforts in affordable tourism for the bourgeois masses in the 1840s, is usually said to have destroyed the Golden Age of travel. Sprawling tourist infrastructure has spoiled natural surroundings and traditional cultures, while swelling tourist

hordes have made authentic cultural encounters nearly impossible. By putting *travail* back into travel (Lisle 2010) volunteer tourism will hopefully recover some of these mythical connotations. The fact that this romantic longing for the bygone era of aristocratic travel contains an elitist discontent with the democratization of tourism does not seem to upset this logic (Butcher 2003: 23). Those who dispose of the 'discretionary time and income to travel out of their sphere of regular activity to help others in need' (McGehee and Santos 2005: 760) will broaden their cultural horizons and gain a sense of self-fulfilment. Those who do not fall by the wayside.

From a technical perspective, the narrow understanding of voluntourism we receive from leisure and hospitality studies speaks to the broader episte-mological and methodological parochialisms of the discipline. Most tourism research adopts a behaviourist approach that privileges volunteers' motivations, attitudes and experiences over the larger power relations and socio-economic conditions that make this encounter possible in the first place. It is commendable that tourism research makes an effort to include individual 'voices' (tourist and local), but when all voices are treated equally, regardless of their social position and background, this empiricist commitment becomes futile (Bayart 2008: 199). Just because volunteers are enthusiastic about and satisfied with their chosen holiday does not mean that the practice as a whole is unproblematic or progressive (Guttentag 2009: 540). We also need to probe the discursive and historical conditions that allow some to take a cheap holiday in other people's lives. Yet leisure and hospitality studies are mostly reluctant to pursue this line of inquiry. Instead, they prefer to approach tourism in purely technical terms, as a set of transactions between hosts and guests to be assessed in terms of returns, customer satisfaction, best business practices and regulatory codes of conduct (Hutnyk 2004).

In addition, tourism studies have a history of cutting up fluid tourist practices into static and discreet typologies that correspond neatly to niches in the industry, such as all-inclusive tourism, sex tourism, ecotourism, heritage tourism, responsible tourism, volunteer tourism and so on. This so-called 'trinketization of tourism' is part of a larger move in tourism studies to reduce 'all life to mere commodities' (Hutnyk 2007) and is indicative of the discipline's uncomfortable proximity and subservience to market research (Allon *et al.* 2008: 75). Tourism sociologists complain that the descriptive and business-friendly tone of this literature has produced 'a tradition of flatfooted sociology and psychology', which is more concerned with providing empirical support and technical advice to the travel industry than 'indulging' in critical theory (Franklin and Crang 2001: 6). Not surprisingly, then, much of the academic discussion on volunteer tourism 'ignore[s] politics, commodification, inequality and exploitation at the very moment that these matters are the very basis of the possibility of "third-world" tourism in the first place' (Hutnyk 2006).

One criticism leisure and hospitality research has taken seriously with regards to voluntourism is the 'hypocrisy charge'. What if volunteers are not entirely selfless souls, but participate only for personal and professional gain?

Media attacks on volunteer tourism have done a lot to spread these fears in the public mind. For instance, a *Maclean's* article aptly entitled 'Helping the World. And Me: Is Volunteer Tourism about Saving the World or Enhancing a Résumé?' notes that 'what inspires idealistic twenty-something-year-olds to lend a [helping] hand often has less to do with philanthropy and more to do with "personal gain"', be it in the form of course credit or professional credentials (Mendleson 2008). An on-going Dalhousie University study on the implications of voluntourism observes that the most-cited reasons interviewees give for participating in volunteering trips are skills acquisition and career development (ibid.). Responses to this charge are divided. Some choose to dismiss it altogether, seeing egoism as a universal trait of human nature: 'I think most people would be lying if they didn't say there was some selfishness in why they were going [to volunteer]' (Wearing 2001: 70). Others argue that self-interest, although not the best of human traits, can be excused as long as voluntourism continues to attract a growing number of followers and effect positive social change (Söderman and Snead 2008). Whatever the response, the 'hypocrisy charge' implies the wilful distortion of an otherwise noble intention. It does not dispute the moral desirability of volunteer tourism. It does not question its structural or discursive organization. It only suggests that a few bad apples have co-opted volunteering for their own benefit and urges us to fine-tune the industry's recruitment and supervisory mechanisms to better distinguish those who sign up for selfish reasons (to enhance their résumé, gain social capital, follow a popular trend) from those who enrol for noble ones (to explore another culture, learn another language, provide much-needed assistance, develop new skills, go on an alternative kind of holiday or fulfil a life-long dream).

A much more serious charge is the idea that no matter how pure or corrupt the intentions, volunteer tourism always benefits travellers far more than it does host communities. Recent media coverage suggests that volunteer tourism is a form of 'new age colonialism' (Lonely Planet 2007: 10) that works to inflate volunteers' sense of self-esteem and alleviate their guilty conscience at the expense of locals, whose needs remain unaddressed, whose jobs are replaced by unskilled volunteers and who are condemned to perform low-wage service work for the enjoyment of Western tourists (Birrell 2010; Richter 2010).

> The desire to engage with the world is laudable, as is the desire to volunteer. But we need to tread more carefully. Unless we have time and transferrable skills, we might do better to travel, trade and spend money in developing countries. The rapid growth of 'voluntourism' is like the rapid growth of the aid industry: salving our own conscience without fully examining the consequences for the people we seek to help. All too often, our heartfelt efforts to help only make matters worse.
>
> (Birrell 2010)

A slightly more vitriolic accusation suspects tourists of using volunteering only to rank themselves against other travellers on the backpacker circuit in

ways that are so vain and petty that they do not even deserve to be included under the category of social capital. Exceptional volunteering tales like, 'I was in Malawi to set up a creative writing program. For orphans. *In jail*', become a rare asset that can be exchanged for status, authority and even sex (MacKinnon 2009). The more sordid the placement, the greater its aura.

These are not new accusations. Critical scholarship on tourism has always operated on the assumption that travelling to the Global South helps white middle-class subjects assert their autonomy, magnanimity and superiority over the backward locals and the less educated and mobile working classes at home. 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. Continuing an argument first launched by Edward Said (1979), English and cultural studies have taken to analyzing the discourse of travelogues in search of the continuities between colonial rule and travel (Mills 1991; Pratt 1992; Grewal 1997; Ghose 1998). For postcolonial theory, in particular, travel writing has become an easy target to demonstrate the violent and exclusionary effects of colonial forms of knowledge and power. As one commentator notes, travel writing is 'the most recent darling of the trendy humanities and lit-crit set, who scour travel books, both well known and hopelessly obscure, for evidence of postcolonialism, postimperialism, patriarchy and other evils' (Wilson cited in Lisle 2006: 18). But just because this has become a fashionable trend does not mean that the disparaging conclusions they reach are incorrect. The criticism, it seems, is rather directed at the one-dimensionality of the analysis, which is overly concerned with matters of representation and textuality. That is why the few studies that take a more empirical approach to the topic are a welcome addition.

Nancy Cook's (2005, 2007, 2008) and Barbara Heron's (2007) research on aid workers in the developing world confirms that the aim of transnational philanthropy is not to spread development and cross-cultural understanding, but to endow Western subjects with the 'cultural competencies' (tastes, values, sensibilities and experiences) necessary to perform a 'white', 'bourgeois' and 'enlightened' type of subjectivity (Heron 2007: 29). This is especially true for white women who use charity and philanthropy towards colonial subjects and the domestic poor as a way to carve out a space for themselves in the public sphere and assert their equality vis-à-vis white men (Cruikshank 1999). Kate Simpson (2004, 2005) finds a similar dynamic in volunteer tourism. Despite the language of 'making a difference' and 'broadening horizons', volunteer tourism is not about promoting either development or enlightenment, but rather about cultivating a 'professional, self-governing, careerist persona' (Simpson 2005: 447). This is achieved by cementing already existing stereotypes and dichotomies between mobile, flexible and worldly tourists and poor-but-happy locals. John Hutnyk, in his study of charity workers in Calcutta, takes this point even further. Volunteer tourism, he argues, is 'the soft side of an otherwise brutal system of exploitation' in that it maintains the 'Third World' as the disempowered recipient of our discretionary aid and benevolence (Hutnyk

1996: ix). The most vocal critic of volunteer tourism, however, remains Ivan Illich. In an unapologetic speech delivered to a room full of soon-to-be volunteers in Mexico he argues that 'good' volunteers are the hypocritical ones because they prefer to ignore the forms of inequality that give them the right 'to impose [their] benevolence' on the developing world (Illich 1968: 4). According to Illich, if we conducted an *honest* evaluation of volunteering programs, something all organizations should periodically engage in, the political amnesia informing this type of travel as well as its utterly unredeemable nature would become painfully evident. Compared to the mostly 'stale, tired, repetitive and lifeless' study of tourism (Franklin and Crang 2001: 5), critical approaches such as these help politicize transnational travel by demonstrating how everyday practices usually imagined as trivial or private are in fact key sites of producing and disseminating political meanings, from cosmopolitan visions to imperialist impositions.

In international studies, a discipline that claims to study precisely this global distribution of power, the discussion on global tourism is still sparse. Much like anthropology, sociology and geography, international relations (IR) 'can barely disguise [its] contempt' for tourism (Crick 1989: 308). This has a lot to do both with the methodological and the thematic requirements of tourism research. Researchers fear that going into the field and spending extended periods of time in the proximity of tourists will cloud their powers of judgement and jeopardize their professional credibility. As Malcolm Crick explains, tourism is a 'cracked mirror in which we can see something of the social system which produces [field workers] as well as tourists' (Crick 1985: 78). If academic work is governed by a bourgeois value system that maintains a strict separation between work and leisure, researchers who act like tourists risk violating this code and compromising their claims to disciplinary authority and, implicitly, public funding. This is particularly true for people doing ethnography.

Ethnographers have always competed with tourists over the authenticity and credibility of the reports they bring back from foreign lands (Badone 2004: 186). To demonstrate their professionalism, field workers must act like heroic figures in search of legitimate (read: scientific) knowledge, not slackers indulging in journeys of self-discovery and questionable public conduct. These methodological concerns, which feature prominently in all social science disciplines, are further exacerbated in the case of international relations, a discipline so preoccupied with questions of inter-state security and so deeply entrenched in the legacy of rational positivism that ethnographic research on the quotidian aspects of life is bound to arouse suspicion.

These obstacles notwithstanding, the past decade has witnessed the publication of a handful of IR studies dealing with transnational tourism in relation to state building (Hazbun 2008), global political economy (Chin 2008), national identity and global development (Clancy 2001, 2009). This book shares the closest affinity to Debbie Lisle's study of *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (2006). Lisle starts from the assumption that travelogues are revelatory of global politics in the same way that government documents or

media reports are. They shape and consolidate our understanding of other people and places in ways that are far from benign. According to Lisle travel writing is dominated by two main approaches to identity and difference, and she takes issue with both. The colonial approach, she argues, assesses cultural differences from a Eurocentric gaze, whereas the cosmopolitan view celebrates global diversity from an equally European belief in recognition, tolerance and multiculturalism. The first seeks to erase difference by imposing universal liberal values onto people in extreme positions of inequality; the second neglects or trivializes difference to overlook the persistence of global poverty and injustice. Both gazes, in one way or another, 'mimic the "previous sensibilities" of Empire' (ibid. 5). What Lisle has to say about travelogues is also true for volunteers. Just like travelogues are historically linked to imperial adventures, so volunteers, as amateur anthropologists in foreign lands, reproduce problematic representations of difference with concrete political implications. They either disparage the other, legitimizing centuries of foreign intervention and dispossession, or they romanticize local populations, refuting their claims to material redistribution and social justice.

Still, in what follows, I want to encourage a more ambivalent reading of voluntourism, which acknowledges the continuity between volunteer tourism and colonial forms of knowledge, power and domination, but which also respects the novel and fluid elements of this experience. There is a lot more uncertainty and contingency found over the course of a volunteering trip than in a fixed literary text. Ethnography can capture the temporal fluctuation of voluntourism in ways that discursive readings of travel narratives cannot.

Ethnography: journey and method

From the very start I wanted this to be an ethnographic project. Both the sycophantic appraisals found in leisure and hospitality studies and the critical accusations of neo-colonialism fail to capture the complex logic of volunteer tourism, which I understand as an *innovative* strategy of government reflective of contemporary transformations in capitalist production, consumption and citizenship practices. To the extent that volunteer tourism offers us a glimpse into neoliberal strategies of subject formation, I was hoping to tell a story that extended far beyond international volunteering into an anthropology of the present, or a biopsy of neoliberal rationalities of government. While I had no shortage of grand scholarly ambition, I did not have a clear hypothesis to guide me through the project. All I had was a vague idea about the compassionate pretences of volunteer tourism collected from travel guides and promotional brochures. The project became ethnographic almost by default because ethnography is the process (and the outcome) of recreating the world of meaning experienced during fieldwork without aiming for scientific objectivity and replicability. With its method of 'deep hanging out' (Madison 2005) and commitment to self-reflexivity, ethnography would allow me to embark on a double rite of passage: that of a tourist entering the 'secrets' of another culture and

that of a field worker penetrating the 'inner sanctum' of a disciplinary tradition (Badone 2004: 184). But, at the time, I had little idea about where this would take me or the surprises, false expectations and changes of heart involved in getting there.

My interest in ethnography did not come out of thin air. In the social sciences, feminist, postcolonial and Marxist writers began importing ethnographic methods and materials during the 1980s. Gathering spoken and performative repertoires of people 'on the ground' became the preferred method of research for scholars interested in the political value of the subaltern, the personal and the everyday. Much of the infatuation with ethnography can be explained in terms of its promise to access the 'really real' (Behar 2003: 16), let the subaltern speak and produce innocent knowledge outside the constraints of theory and representation (Scott 1992: 44). The hope was that ethnography, with all its participatory and experiential qualities, would capture a more accurate and relevant version of social reality and communicate it in a jargon-free style. This is a noble ambition. Who would not want to write 'stories about real people in real places' (Behar 2003: 16) that cross academic walls and help spur political change? But this 'ethnographilia' also betrays a century-old quest for authenticity and real-world applicability haunting the social sciences and humanities. It lies at the root of many misguided attempts to 'write from the heart' without much theoretical depth or political weight (Vrasti 2008).

Strangely enough, just as ethnography was 'being widely appropriated as a liberating method' in fields such as cultural studies, social history and political science, 'its authority [was and still is] seriously challenged from both within anthropology and outside' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 7). During the 1980s, anthropology was undergoing a *crise de conscience* of its own, triggered in equal measure by the (re)discovery of the discipline's colonial roots and growing scepticism about ethnography being the 'idiom in which [reality] prefers to be described' (Geertz 1988: 140). Critical anthropologists were pointing out that ethnography cannot create a perfect correspondence between reality and its textual representation. Interviews and verbal testimonies cannot guarantee access to some unadulterated version of reality. Rather, all ethnography 'is from beginning to end enmeshed in writing', as James Clifford famously pronounced (1983: 120; *see also* Clifford 1988, 1986a, 1986b; Fabian 1983, 1991; Rosaldo 1986, 1993; Behar 1996). This meant that it was the ethnographer, with the help of narrative strategies like unobtrusive observation, theoretical abstraction and professional jargon, that was producing the veracity and authority of the text – not the 'indigenous' voices and events from the field (Marcus and Cushman 1982: 31–37). This tight editorial control, which was seen as a continuation of anthropology's uncomfortable relation with colonial forms of domination, had to be unsettled by bringing in different voices, more transparent writing and self-reflexive theorizing.

I was not really interested in pursuing either one of these avenues. I was neither convinced by the idea that ethnography could offer a window onto reality, nor did I want to experiment with the deconstructivist promises of the

genre. Gradually, it seemed less important to me that ethnography unsettles the spatio-temporal foundations of textual representation and disciplinary knowledge. If initially I had been sympathetic to this project (Vrasti 2008), over the course of my field work I would discover a more pragmatic use for ethnography. I began to see ethnography as a strategy for navigating the ambiguities of researching a trend I found both fascinating and problematic, living with people who would become my friends and the target of my critique, amidst cultures I could not fully understand or appreciate.

Constraints of funding and time limited my research to only two commercial voluntourism projects: one with a small nature conservation organization called Volunteer Peten in Guatemala, the other with a large and fairly renowned voluntourism agency, named Projects Abroad, teaching English in Ghana. Since I was going to write a touring ethnography of volunteer tourism, I wanted to respect the inevitable messiness of independent travel. I planned for flights, visas and vaccines, but left lots of room in my luggage for chance encounters and changes of heart. I left home in fall 2008, hoping to find the compassionate subject eager to 'give back' and 'do something useful on vacation' the brochure discourse seemed directed at. My guiding assumption was that there had been a significant shift in the logic of neoliberal governmentality from the (wo)man of reason to the (wo)man of feeling, from the *homo oeconomicus* guided exclusively by market rationality to a more complex figure that complemented utility calculations with Romantic sensibilities and bohemian values. I originally thought the sacrificial, charitable and even heroic acts young middle-class adults were encouraged to perform on volunteering trips to the Global South would help demonstrate the incorporation (or instrumentalisation) of affectivity under neoliberal rule. But, as is often the case with ethnography, knowledge rarely awaits us in the field. If it does, it is a different type of knowledge than we expected.

During my travels to Guatemala and Ghana, where I conducted some 30 interviews with volunteers and staff members, I found little evidence to substantiate the stories of sacrifice and compassion advertised in brochures. Instead, I would repeatedly hear volunteers complain about 'not feeling needed' and experience the sentiment myself. The places we lived in (San Andres, Guatemala and Ho, Ghana) did not resemble the photogenic poverty shots many of us had seen on charity infomercials and fundraiser posters. There were no visible signs of starvation or malady and locals did not seem to need or appreciate our assistance. There was constant frustration about the poor organization of volunteer placements, which were either unresponsive to local needs or poorly tailored to volunteers' professional skills. All in all, we often felt useless, bored and, even somewhat, deceived. On average, it only took volunteers a couple of weeks to give up on their compassionate ambitions of 'making a difference in the world' and start slacking. We would travel on weekends, hang out in bars and at expat hotel pools and spend several hours every day in internet cafes.

Initially, I feared that I had picked the wrong research sites. I could not understand how care and compassion could be missing from a practice that

depended on these very emotions for its success. It took me some time to realize that whatever the technical or ethical difficulties of volunteer programs, these do not necessarily detract from the appeal of the voluntourism experience. Most volunteering programs are poorly structured, unaccountable to local needs and simply chaotic, yet they continue to succeed, not only in the commercial sense, but also in endowing volunteers with a sense of personal meaning, self-esteem and worldliness. There is a distinction to be made between the volunteering *organization*, whose role is simply to sell a product that grants tourists access to a locale they would otherwise not dare to travel to on their own, and the volunteering *experience*, which includes encounters and events far beyond this narrow commercial exchange. Just because the placements at Volunteer Peten and Projects Abroad did not allow volunteers to demonstrate their compassion and good will, does not mean that my initial suspicion of volunteer tourism being an indication of a new turn in neoliberal governmentality towards affect and sociality is incorrect. As both trips would prove, volunteers had no trouble finding alternative ways to demonstrate their emotional capacities and entrepreneurial competencies.

In Guatemala, volunteers affirmed their cosmopolitanism by showing their appreciation for the local culture and people. If San Andres was not 'poor enough' to allow volunteers to demonstrate their compassion, at least it was slow, quaint and remote enough to let volunteers develop a cultural sensibility of the liberal multiculturalist sort. Because San Andres could conceal its lacks so very well, the place came to serve as a 'supply point' of desire for Western tourists and a backdrop for their sentimental education (Ahmed 2006: 115). Even if the work itself was not rewarding, living in a distant rural town with strong familial bonds and an unhurried pace of life still allowed white middle-class tourists to escape the conformity of consumer capitalism and experience life outside the estrangement of modern society.

In Ghana things were somewhat more complicated because racial tensions stood in the way of any such coalitions of sympathy. Volunteers felt exhausted and harassed by the scrutinizing gaze of locals, which they perceived as 'reverse racism'. But here too volunteering or simply living in exotic, dangerous 'Africa' functioned like a seal of maturity, bravery and self-sacrifice. Living in a radically different culture, without local language skills, modern amenities or the comfort of loved ones, students and graduates acquired the immaterial skills (communication, cooperation, leadership skills, problem solving) needed in the new economy. Phrases like 'expand your horizons', 'fulfil your potential' or 'come back a changed individual' may sound like empty platitudes, but, in fact, they express the sincere pedagogical ambition of volunteer tourism. In both instances, then, volunteer tourism acted as a successful and seductive strategy of government in its ability to produce subjects and social relations congruent with the exigencies of cognitive capitalism.

I could have never told this story without the help of ethnography, which is particularly well-suited to capturing the inherent fluidity of travel. What seems to be a fairly clear-cut sub-section of the tourism industry is, in fact, a

peripatetic practice that combines experiences of holiday and dwelling, citizenship and touristic practices, work and leisure in new and exciting ways (Allon *et al*. 2008: 14). That is why, instead of talking about volunteer tourism as a self-contained, empirically observable practice, as in most tourism and hospitality studies, we are better off thinking about volunteers drifting along a continuum from 'travelling' to 'dwelling' in search of meaning and self-esteem in the global arena (Hutnyk 1996; Allon *et al*. 2008: 86–87; Ong 1999: 6). Also, a politically engaged study of volunteer tourism is one that does not simply describe volunteer tourism, but also connects it to other itinerant sites (consumption patterns, labour markets, universities) and identities (employers, educators, local populations) to show how it operates as part of larger socio-economic and cultural circuits. Ethnography, with its mix of experience and interpretation, empirical observation and theoretical abstraction, sensorial proximity and intellectual astuteness (Clifford 1988), helped me make these connections explicit in a way that other social science methods, both positivist and constructivist, often cannot either because they are too concerned with scientifically representing empirical reality or because they absolve themselves from this responsibility altogether.

What is true of tourism can also be said of subjectivity: it is an inherently elusive category that escapes perfect representation. Subjectivity is never complete; it is a constant field of struggle between power and resistance: both are present at all times. Several accounts have already tried to capture the complexities of neoliberal subjectivity, with an eye to both its entrepreneurial and affective injunctions, most notably David Brooks (2000) and Richard Florida (2002). Yet instead of exploring the temporal unfolding of subject formation, these authors have used behavioural trivia and pop-psychological observations to present us with an already formed subject, an individual so set in their ways and so secure in their position that it can only be an inanimate prototype. Ethnography proved crucial for charting the temporality of subject making over the course of a volunteering trip, from fantasies of care and compassion to boredom and disillusionment and, finally, to the development of multicultural sensibilities and other affective competencies useful for cognitive capitalism. It revealed not only the ways in which volunteers' charitable impulses and cosmopolitan sensibilities get co-opted by dominant discourses of rule, but also how volunteers resort to boredom and frustration to contradict the brochure discourse and reject the institutional organization of volunteering to stage more self-directed encounters with difference. The latter should be regarded as instances of resistance even if ultimately they get channelled back into the logic of neoliberal governmentality.

But it is not just volunteers who travel, crossing continents and shifting subject positions. Research travels as well. The project travelled through various stages of research, from literature review to field work, back through libraries, field notes, committee meetings, conference presentations, successive writing and endless editing stages to see the light of day. Some of these travels were filled with false expectations and dead ends; others were full of epiphanies and

surprises. In all cases, the road research travels from thesis to theory is unpredictable and filled with doubt and anxiety. Telling this story in a way that remains loyal to the windy road knowledge travels before it reaches the reader's eye is the primary task of ethnography.

I am not talking here about ethnography's promise to 'liberate [academics] from the pedantic, technical discourse of their disciplines' (Foley and Valenzuela 2005: 224). Rather, what I am referring to is the idea of ethnographic writing as *improvisation* (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007). Throughout this book I use ethnography less as a method for gathering information through interviews and participant observation (although this is clearly part of the process) than a textual strategy for building theory from the disparate events, statements, experiences, dilemmas and surprises I encountered during my travels, but also at home, at my desk, in libraries, at conferences and during seminars. Ethnographic improvisation, then, is a logistical answer to the problem of managing conflicting and overlapping information, commitments and social roles. It requires constant travelling back and forth between the part and the whole, experience and text, fieldwork and theory until we finally find a persuasive way to piece these two seemingly distinct registers together (Cerwonka 2007: 15, 19).

Making this improvisational work public is not just an exercise in honesty, but also a challenge to what is formally known as 'method' – how it is taught, practised and written up. We are taught in methodology courses that research is the result of a linear accumulation of knowledge. But the answers to our research questions rarely await us 'in the field'. Often we return home more confused than we were in the first place. It is neither experience nor interpretation, neither methodological virtuosity nor theoretical skill that makes research work, but improvisation (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007). This has nothing to do with 'weak' research design or self-indulgent solipsism. There is as much reflection as there is spontaneity involved in the task of writing ethnography, which after all is nothing but the selective retelling (gathering, sorting, arranging, reformulating and forgetting) of fieldwork events with the double aim of theoretical persuasiveness and sensorial accuracy (van Maanen 1988). A text that is aware of 'the subtle forms of knowledge found in ineffable moments of intuition and epiphany' (Behar 2003: 23) only acquires a more credible voice: nothing can be left out of ethnography without, automatically, taking something away from theory.

But a more honest ethnography is not necessarily a more accurate representation of reality. Not only does writing always distort reality, as post-structuralism teaches us, but, without being filtered through theory, ethnography remains little more than a storytelling device. Only very late in my research did I realize that while I aspired to recreate the dramatic milieu of everyday experience through ethnography, indeed to correct the dehumanized (people-less, story-less and emotionless) view of reality social science research gives us, without the import of theory, especially the dense, continental kind, I would not be able to explain the material and symbolic conditions that make volunteer tourism a desideratum for neoliberal subjectivity. Ethnography, unfortunately, cannot

single-handedly offer a critique of volunteer tourism because it lacks an explicit political orientation beyond its rather recent commitment to transparency, polyphony and deconstruction. These are worthwhile objectives to have (especially in my case where I was not the only ethnographer in the field: all volunteers are anthropologists eager to understand the local culture without spoiling it), but without a larger political ambition even the most ethically conscious texts cannot help but remain mired in the technical or the anecdotal. Verbal testimonies, everyday actions and local colour, no matter how evocatively reproduced, cannot speak for themselves: they only provide a picture of the subjects and social relations present in volunteer tourism, not an analysis of their historical, political and material conditions of possibility. This is particularly dangerous in the case of volunteer tourism where, as Jean-Francois Bayart puts it, 'the question of subjectivation is too serious to be left up to the subjects' (2008: 199). In other words, no matter how urgent the ethical demands of textual representation, we cannot allow the spoken repertoires of our research subjects to sideline the material and discursive strategies involved in producing a neoliberal social field (Ferguson 2006: 19).

To make ethnography amenable to the study of the distribution, reproduction and contestation of power I decided to place it in conversation with Foucault's archaeological method. The archaeological method, also known as 'analytics of government' (Rose 1999: 15–20; Dean 1999: 20–27), is interested less in describing the 'general principles of reality' than in identifying the rationalities that make that reality acceptable and the fissures that could transform it (Foucault 2002: 201). Its purpose is to unearth the conditions that make certain judgments possible and foreclose others, the rules and forces that make certain utterances and performances coagulate into a regime of truth and outlaw others as instances of illegality and abnormality (Butler 2003: 4). Different from historical methods, archaeology does not dig up chronological events and personalities to explain how the past became the present. Rather, it interrogates the rationalities through which the present became materially and historically possible in the first place (Gordon 1980: 242). Archaeology does not explore the essence of things and, as such, is allergic to concepts that historical, sociological, economic and political analyses take as a given (state, sovereignty, civil society, people, capital, etc). Instead, it 'examines the conditions under which regimes of practices come into being, are maintained and are transformed' (Dean 1999: 21). Foucauldian archaeology allows us to analyze the discursive repertoires of volunteer tourists in a way that goes beyond the psychological and sociological appearances of tourism explored in leisure studies and beyond the 'ascribed/described/pronounced subjectivities' highlighted in post-structural and postcolonial analyses (Hutnyk 2007). It allows a 'not so fashionable materialist analysis' of the power relations that make volunteer tourism a necessary and commendable enterprise (ibid.).

Overall, then, I adopt a dialogical method that switches between the narrative testimonies and experiences of volunteers and a critical analysis of the governmental strategies involved in their subjectivization. One cannot function

without the other. The minute detailing of everyday practices and lived experiences is purely descriptive unless it takes into account the regulatory effects of political institutions, economic regimes and programs of governmentality. By corollary, an analytics of governmentality without an element of human agency remains sterile and abstract (Ong 1999: 3–4). The former is particularly useful in making sense of the unwieldy strategies involved in producing subjects, while the latter helps capture the rules and forces that valorise certain subjects while delegitimizing others. This exchange also allows for theory to be brought back into the conversation without necessarily reproducing the anxieties around aloof and inaccessible scholarly texts. It helps demonstrate the power of critical theory to act as a hermeneutic guide to the present condition and our role in it.

In merging ethnography and archaeology, my writing has perhaps become much more theory driven than I had originally hoped. While this may seem like a betrayal of my initial ethnographic aspirations, I maintain that theory does not necessarily act as an alienating force. To inspire political action, social analysis does not have to keep scholarly erudition to a bare minimum, as many ethnographic aficionados propose. The 'all-these-theories-and-the-bodies-keep-piling-up' logic (Zalewski 1996) often does more to police the use-value of critical theory than advance politically progressive scholarship. While appeals to linguistic clarity are not without merit, the all-too-often concomitant notion that ideas themselves ought to be simple typically stems from populist anti-intellectualism. Making scholarly texts 'user-friendly' is, in fact, a lengthy and arduous task involving a great deal of political engagement, disciplined commitment and editing work.

We cannot reject critical theory off-hand simply on account of its textual density. Certainly, there are plenty of examples of 'bad' theory – exceedingly esoteric, methodologically flawed, poorly communicated and plain unconvincing theory. But, I would argue, these are less examples of theory than of 'theoreticism' – the dogmatic application of critical theory divorced from its historical context and lived surroundings. To quote Sylvère Lotringer (2009), 'anti-theory and theoreticism are two sides of the same coin. But, of course, it is the wrong coin'. In a slightly different vein, Fredric Jameson explains that 'what is socially offensive about "theoretical" texts like [his] own, is not their inherent difficulty, but rather the signals of higher education, that is, of class privilege, which they emit' (cited in Kunkel 2010). The confinement of theory to the halls of the corporate university is indicative of a larger tendency in neoliberal capital to commodify dissent (Frank and Weiland 2002; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). The knee-jerk reaction to this is to reject theory altogether for its elitist connotations. A much better strategy would be to recognize that theory is what makes the world around us intelligible and malleable, and try to rescue it from the claws of professionalism by democratizing theoretical literacy.

This is not always an easy task. Much of the language and ideas presented in this book, for instance, are not readily accessible to people outside the profession – a problem I assume full responsibility for. However, I found theory

to be essential for understanding the duplicity and complexity of our current predicament, where radical aspirations for community, autonomy and human dignity are systematically placed in the service of market imperatives and disciplinary rule. Emancipatory politics that trades theory for 'speaking truth to power' is bound to produce more of the same. The road to hell is paved with uncritical intentions. My hope was that theory would help us understand how even pleasurable and empowering individuation strategies, like those employed in volunteer tourism, can make people complicit with unjust and violent conditions, and that this would encourage a more rigorous (self-)examination of our deepest emotional and political investments – a 'critical ontology of ourselves', as Foucault called it (1997c).

Governmentality, biopolitics, capital

Speaking of theory, most of the inspiration for this project comes from Michel Foucault's lecture series at the Collège de France, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), where he argues that neoliberal government is neither the ideology of neo-conservative policy makers, nor a historical period characterized by the withdrawal of state authority in times of economic globalization. Rather, it is a set of power relations that extends the logic of market relations to the entire social field, from macroeconomic policies to public policy, education, labour, recreation and personal conduct. The market becomes both the power of formalizing state and society and the standard of truth against which these should be measured. The first order of business in neoliberalism, then, is to intervene in the social sphere to make sure that it contains forms of life, action and sociality appropriate for a flexible market economy. This objective does not necessarily require active planning and premeditation on behalf of state agencies and representatives. Something more complicated is at work here. The ideas (and ideals) of neoliberalism may originate in but also go beyond the institutional loci of government to extend across a variety of social spaces, from households to communities, local to transnational spaces, exceptional to mundane instances. This is what Foucault understood by governmentality: a 'model of social control' that does not rely upon the direct intervention of the state and its agencies of power, but on the ability of individuals to freely govern themselves in light of certain economically viable principles and axioms (McNay 2009: 57).

What this suggests is that subjectivity, our most intimate and private sphere of existence, does not lie 'outside' the purview of power, but is intensely governed (Rose 1991: 1). This 'growing inclusion of man's natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power' (1998: 119) is what Agamben, following Foucault, defined as biopower. Autonomist Marxists like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) later modified the term to suggest a mode of organization that subsumes all social life, including areas formerly external or ornamental to capitalism, to the logic of capitalist production. Whereas previous forms of capitalism extract value from turning raw materials into commodities, today's

cognitive capitalism hinges on our collective penchant for language, communication, sociality and affectivity. The Marxist interpretation of Foucault (the 'Italian Foucault' in this case) takes seriously the claim that biopolitics is not just about regulating the beginnings and endings of life, but also about producing, sustaining and enriching the content of our lives. Biopolitics is present not only in exceptions to the law or violations of our human rights. It also harbours a distinctly normative ambition. On the one hand, biopolitics seeks to optimize the content of our lives by producing a healthy, productive and fulfilled workforce. On the other, it tries to align capitalism with certain normative principles borrowed from multiculturalism and identity politics, countercultural movements and associational life (community, communication, cooperation, charity, compassion, dignity, creativity). In effect, biopolitics comes to stand in for the social goal capitalism was accused of never having (Jameson 2000: 62).

Nowhere is the biopolitical ambition of neoliberal government more evident than in the strategies used to encourage subjects to give their lives an entrepreneurial shape. The so-called *homo oeconomicus* model of action, described by Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), but also used in classical economics, urges individuals to make choices in terms of cost–benefit calculations, assume responsibility for their actions and treat all those around them as potential competitors in the struggle for human capital (McNay 2009: 63). As the example of volunteer tourism demonstrates, market rationality is a necessary but not exclusive condition to meet these requirements. The rational, rugged and ruthless entrepreneur championed in economic liberalism is sometimes at odds with the normative ambitions of biopolitics. Especially since the student and worker struggles of the 1960s and 1970s helped expose the alienating and authoritarian consequences of modernist structures of living and working, it no longer seems sufficient (or satisfactory) for individuals to navigate their social surroundings using only instrumental action to the exclusion of all other social and moral considerations. The new entrepreneur, invoked in management literature, self-help books, urban regeneration schemes and government initiatives of the 'Third Way', is not asked to dispense with economic rationality, only to complement it with what were once bohemian and counter-cultural dispositions. Instead of the rational, calculating and cold-blooded *American Psycho*, the good neoliberal subject of the twenty-first century is the rather schizophrenic figure of the compassionate entrepreneur, the happy workaholic, the charitable CEO, the creative worker, the frugal consumer and, last but not least, the volunteer tourist.

This shift in subjectivization strategies might look like cause for celebration: it seems to invite more meaningful, rewarding and humane forms of (inter) action. But it should in fact be reason for concern: a model of subject formation that takes its cue from the principles of economic entrepreneurship, even when entrepreneurship combines instrumental rationality with cosmopolitan sensibilities, introduces new selection criteria for political membership and economic security that in many ways are more stringent and more ambiguous than ever before. What this suggests is that political subjectivity, that is,

the ability to make ourselves into subjects that can act meaningfully in the world, is in fact a scarce and unequally distributed good. Unlike Foucault, who saw subjectivity as a ubiquitous, inescapable process of meaning making, this approach suggests that governmentality is never about including or sub-jecting everyone equally. It is simply a standard of measurement to assess people's ability to live up to whatever governmental injunctions are deemed necessary, ordered and just in a particular historical moment. There is plenty of room for both pleasure and punishment in this story. Those who live up to historically sanctioned programs, strategies and technologies of government will come to enjoy full political and economic rights. The rest will suffer various degrees of exclusion and exploitation in the form of un- and underemployed, indentured labourers, undocumented migrants and so on.

In dedicating their time and money to helping the global poor, volunteers display precisely the types of qualities needed to assume a privileged subjectivity: an ability to operate in distant and diverse settings, a desire for social change and an interest in experimenting with one's self and the world around it. Meanwhile, the recipients of their charity are excluded from this exchange and the possibilities for mobility, development and self-determination it entails. They must remain passive victims or timeless objects of attraction to help volun-teer tourists acquire social capital and entrepreneurial competencies when vacationing in their midst. The paradox of volunteer tourism is that, even when it takes place in the Global South, its merits are assessed according to norms and principles dominant in liberal post-industrial societies. It is 'at home' that the mobility, creativity and magnanimity volunteers display overseas are turned into desirable goods for an economy where credentials and expertise are no longer enough to secure employment, and for a political community where territorial belonging is no longer a sufficient condition for full membership.

Repopulating international relations

This book is written from a multi-disciplinary perspective that combines insights from anthropology, sociology, geography, cultural studies and political theory. Its disciplinary home, however, remains international relations. Volunteer tourism is a worthwhile topic of inquiry for international politics not neces-sarily because it is a transnational phenomenon with a range of implications for cross-border mobility, economic development, policy-making structures, global security and the environment, as others have already demonstrated (Hazbun 2008, Chin 2008, Clancy 2001, 2009). More importantly, global tour-ism provides us with a glimpse of the lived encounters that give shape to global identities and relations. I agree with Debbie Lisle (2006) when she argues that tourism is just as illustrative of global politics as government documents or media reportage because it informs and legitimizes the ways in which we understand and engage with other people and places.

As a traditionally state-centred discipline with positivist foundations, IR has usually ignored the fact that identity formation lies at the heart of our

political engagement with transnational others. World politics needs to be recognized 'as a process of cultural interactions in which the identities of actors are not given prior to or apart from' seemingly mundane exchanges like those produced through international tourism (Anand 2007: 13). The price IR pays for this neglect is high. It dehumanizes the discipline, causing it to produce expertise that is often complicit with imperial intervention, policing and dispossession. It also produces sterile knowledge that students and the public at large find difficult to relate to. This is not to say that the contribution of this study consists only in filling a gap in the repertoire of international studies. To constantly try to make IR complete by adding new methods, topics of inquiry and theoretical approaches from the 'outside' will only further cement the discipline's ontological insularity from economics, sociology, history and philosophy (Walker 1993, Beier and Arnold 2005). Rather, the arguments in this book are meant to make an intervention in critical debates on subjectivity, power and resistance that stretch across various disciplines.

My ambition in studying volunteer tourism is to repopulate IR scholarship with the voices and actions of white middle-class individuals (the bourgeoisie so to speak), not so different, in terms of their economic background, education, values and tastes, from those populating the academic profession. There has always been a deeply ingrained belief, amongst the bourgeoisie especially, that despite their best intentions white middle-class people will never represent a revolutionary force in society. John Fowles once remarked that 'the bourgeoisie is the only class that genuinely despises itself, its material possessions and social position' (1969). They might donate money to charity, buy fair trade or handmade products, volunteer their time and even become politically active, but at the end of the day they lack the legitimacy and firsthand experience that working-class people, minorities and formerly colonized people have. Whatever the bourgeoisie does in the name of social change and justice it will only help liberal subjects consolidate their social capital and social mobility because, ultimately, the world is made for their inhabitation. This study of volunteer tourism certainly does not escape this line of argument, but at least it tries to counter bourgeois self-hatred with self-reflection. Where usually critical theory will erase the white middle-class subject from the picture, claiming it is already at the centre of cultural value and knowledge production (which is true), and try to replace it with the voice of the oppressed and marginalized, it seems to me it is still important we understand the conditions, both symbolic and material, that make the bourgeoisie the norm-setting class.

IR cannot be accused of having been blind to privilege. In its heyday, the discipline was deeply involved with the 'kitchens of power' (Hoffman 1977: 49, 58) and devoted most of its attention to studying (and influencing) the activities of politicians, bureaucrats and defence intellectuals. Individuals rarely appeared on the international stage, leaving sovereign states to assume the place and role of people. But when they did, it was mostly heads of state, military personnel and diplomats. It was only in the late 1980s, with the publication of a special issue of *International Studies Quarterly* (1990) on

'Speaking the Language of Exile', that a dissident group of IR scholars began to make itself known. Foucault, particularly his theories on discourse, power and history, was quickly mobilized to denaturalize the disciplinarity of the field, especially its overwhelming focus on interstate problems of security and stability to the neglect of domination, inequality and symbolic violence. Amidst the rise of social constructivist epistemologies in the 1980s and 1990s, IR began to turn its attention to the ways in which global power affects people 'on the ground'. Suddenly, a newborn fascination with the lives and voices of marginal subjectivities (women, minorities, native peoples, colonial subjects, migrants and refugees) emerged. Almost overnight, the disciplinary onus (at least in critical quarters) shifted from privilege to persecution.

It is not my intent to belittle these emancipatory efforts, which have done a lot to repopulate global politics with new subjects and forms of agency. Without these interventions, the voices of women, colonial subjects, racial and sexual minorities would have never been heard in international studies. But there are also limitations to this approach. Instead of taking full advantage of the epistemic possibilities it has opened up, critical IR remains enthralled with exceptional and violent instances of power, already abundant in the post-9/11 era (foreign interventions, use of torture, extraordinary rendition, widespread surveillance and several other violations of civil rights). Critical security studies, for instance, assume global biopower manifests itself in the absence or in violation of democratic politics and citizen protections through spectacular instances of new imperialism and fascism (Dillon and Reid 2001, 2009; Shapiro, Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004; Jabri 2006; Reid 2006; Dillon 2007; Dillon and Neal 2008). 'They are more interested in how the liberal way of rule "kill[s] to make life live" than in how it uses capitalist principles to give expression to life's highest ambitions' (Vrasti 2011: 14). Similarly, feminist and postcolonial approaches tend to treat power as a pejorative force the principal goal of which is to dominate and distort our lives. We are dealing here with the remnants of a problematic (humanist) dichotomy between power and people, where the former is a corrupt and ignoble thing while the latter is a repository of autonomy, agency and authenticity. This approach fails to sufficiently distinguish between violence and power, or to consider the productive function of power.

As Foucault explains, violence is a force that destroys certain expendable bodies and objects, whereas power is a relation that organizes social life (communities, identities, education, housing, finance, labour, architecture and lifestyle choices) to help individuals articulate their identity and navigate their social landscape (Deleuze 1988). Power is both what presses upon the subject from the outside and the condition of possibility for the subject to exist, both what we oppose and what we depend on, subordinating and producing us at the same time (Butler 2005: 2). We find a similar 'normative' ambition in biopower. In its most mundane and habitual form, biopower is meant to optimize the health, prosperity and general well-being of the population in the name of economic growth. This is not to deny the violent sacrifices this project often requires in the form of sovereign police, racial discrimination and capitalist

expropriation. But we should also acknowledge that the promise of achieving social cohesion and promoting the health and happiness of the populace usually takes a benign and benevolent aspect supported by rather than defiant of the law.

International relations has neglected these complexities because it prefers to focus on examples that fall 'outside' of the state, leaving the organization of our economies, cities, households and private lives to sociologists and anthropologists. This, I argue, is a missed opportunity. Now that international relations has acquired the necessary space and tools for this type of analysis, it needs to investigate the quotidian, seemingly trivial aspects of international political life to better understand how power, sovereignty and global governance function.

Following this impulse, this book explores how 'average' people attach themselves to power in inconspicuous, seemingly harmless ways. These are neither the elites usually credited with making global politics, nor the marginalized subjects critical theory has become so fond of, but white middle-class individuals. In doing so, this line of inquiry arrives at conclusions that upset the classic picture of subjectivity, agency and resistance critical theory usually presents us with. Volunteer tourism illustrates the famous Foucauldian lesson that power does not just violate or subjugate individual autonomy and agency, it also entices and nurtures them. Liberal capital allows young adults from the Global North to view their intervention as noble and necessary, acquire expertise and self-esteem during their travels and translate their enjoyment into entrepreneurial advantages. This realization that autonomy and agency can in fact lie at 'the heart of … disciplinary control' (McNay 2009: 62) forces us to question our most cherished ideas about resistance. What possibilities for resistance still remain if agency, autonomy and subjectivity are already enlisted in the reproduction of power?

Because critical theory has had a tendency to focus on those for whom power has the most harrowing effects rather than on those who derive enjoyment and status from power, it could comfortably avoid this difficult question. But this is a dangerous omission: neglecting the ways in which the liberal bourgeoisie reproduces itself through material conditions, codes of conduct, tastes and sensibilities risks pushing the invisible centre of our political order further into oblivion and does nothing to undermine its power to shape what is desirable or normative. It only leaves us more mystified about the ways in which power manifests and reproduces itself in the first place. To counteract this omission, I have chosen to put the question of the subaltern on the back-burner of this study. Although the research took place in the Global South, this project remains an anthropology of home. It is mostly concerned with the experiences and subject formation practices of Western individuals travelling abroad, not their impact on host communities.

There were also ethical considerations for this choice. Both Ghana and Guatemala have a long history of white people coming through to inspect, study and take pictures of them. Arriving in these communities to 'help' locals protect their natural resources, bandage wounds and educate their children was an

imposition I no longer cared to extend through personal interviews. Although I had a few informal conversations with locals about the effects of volunteering in their communities, I chose not to reproduce these testimonies. Locals were either sceptical of the overall usefulness of foreign assistance or they refused to recognize volunteers as proper 'workers', preferring to treat them as 'tourists' (read: consumers) instead. Publicizing these attitudes could have jeopardized the livelihoods of local people working with volunteers. Logistical obstacles, such as language barriers and difficult rapport, further added to this decision. This being said, subaltern figures are not entirely absent from this study. They are invoked indirectly through volunteers' humanitarian ambitions and narratives of encounter with local populations. It is through this mediated exchange that we come to grasp the power dynamics at the core of volunteer tourism.

Chapter outline

The second chapter explores the theoretical themes central to this project – the mutations of biopolitics, capital and subjectivity in neoliberal times, and treats volunteer tourism as a symptom of these. Foucault defined neoliberalism as a mode of government that extends the entrepreneurial form across the entire social field without directly manipulating individual freedom and autonomy. The success of this task depends on biopolitical interventions into the life of the population, not only in the form of exceptions and violence, but also by making society congruent with the logic of market rationality. In recent history this has involved the incorporation of dissident language and bohemian values into entrepreneurial conduct. While this has made capital accumulation seem more tolerable and political authority more subtle, the commodification of intellect, affect and sociality extends market logics into the realm of political subjectivity. Political rights and material benefits are distributed competitively depending on individual abilities to abide by the injunctions of neoliberal capital. Only those individuals who are able to respond opportunistically and creatively to the demands of capital stand to benefit from the present condition.

Chapter 3 traces my convoluted research travels through the Peten region of Guatemala. The volunteers I met there did not perceive the local community as poor or appreciative enough to justify the need for foreign assistance. As a result, they quickly lost interest in 'giving back' and 'making a difference', as I had initially expected and turned to alternative ways of demonstrating their affective capacities. They began sightseeing, getting to know the locals and learning about the indigenous culture. Yet the seemingly benign and benevolent coalition of sympathy volunteers crafted with the local population did more to reproduce the depoliticizing logic of multiculturalism than to initiate any meaningful encounter with difference. The experience in Guatemala, then, shows that in subsuming difference to the consumptive logic of capitalism, the emotional styles cultivated in volunteer tourism can only serve to validate the moral superiority of white middle-class subjects.

In Ghana racial tensions made it difficult for volunteers to fall in love with local culture and people. Their white bodies were the constant subject of curiosity and admiration: the texture of their skin and hair was inspected, their table manners studied, their smoking habits scolded, even their pictures taken. Whiteness could no longer function as the absent centre of humanity (Ahmed 2006). To cope with these nervous encounters volunteers had to focus on the technical benefits of their volunteering experience: receiving professional training, living without modern amenities and travelling independently through Western Africa allowed volunteers to develop immaterial skills that would enhance their employability and work versatility in an increasingly competitive and precarious economic climate. Here volunteer tourism functioned as a new type of moral and technical education for young adults who want to learn how to operate in multicultural settings and globalized sites to better consolidate their professional future.

Together these ethnographic chapters examine two interrelated functions of volunteer tourism. While the experience in Guatemala functioned as a form of post-Fordist consumption, which allowed volunteers to affirm their flexibility, mobility and worldliness over less sophisticated consumers, the trip to Ghana taught volunteers to extend their human capital beyond professional expertise and academic credentials in ways congruent with post-Fordist modes of production.

Drawing on these two facets of voluntourism, the final chapter argues that the emotional and entrepreneurial strategies mobilized on these trips (re)produce hierarchical and uneven modes of political subjectivity. In both instances volunteers come to embody desirable resources, capacities and aesthetic sensibilities that help them expand their 'field of possibilities' (Foucault 2001: 343) and acquire a more advantageous form of political subjectivity. Meanwhile local populations remain stuck between the two poles of romanticisation and denigration. The book ends on a positive note. Reflecting on the most recent global economic crisis, I pose the possibility of entrepreneurially oriented acts of community and charity, like volunteer tourism, giving way to non-market-based experiments of living in common.

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