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Mary Mostafanezhad

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The Geography of Compassion in Volunteer Tourism

MARY MOSTAFANEZHAD
Department of Anthropology, College of Social Sciences, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA

ABSTRACT Volunteer tourism is at the center of new concerns over the ethical consumption of tourism experiences. As one link in a broader chain of expansion of neoliberal moral economies in the West, volunteer tourism participants coproduce a ‘geography of compassion’ that maps onto the ‘Third World’ and the children who live there. Drawing on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Chiang Mai, Thailand, I examine the widespread sentiment that Thailand is an ideal starting point for international volunteer tourists who intend to seek out subsequent volunteer opportunities in Africa – where ‘real’ volunteer experiences are to be had. I also highlight the Third World child as the primary object of Western volunteer tourists’ benevolence. Finally, I examine the impetus and implications of these popular sentiments and argue that similar to the broader expansion of neoliberal moral economies, the geography of compassion in volunteer tourism is reflective of the larger – albeit inadvertent – depoliticization of global justice agendas.

KEY WORDS: Volunteer tourism, neoliberalism, humanitarianism, compassion, moral economies, cultural politics, Thailand

Introduction

I decided to volunteer in Thailand because it is my first time outside of Europe. If I was used to traveling, I would have gone to India. Then I would go to Africa. A lot of help is needed in these places. But, I have never been outside of Europe so Thailand is something that I can deal with.

– Martin, 20-year-old German volunteer tourist in Chiang Mai, Thailand

Statements such as Martin’s are commonly echoed by the volunteer tourists who I encountered in Chiang Mai, Thailand. In this paper, I tease out the meanings and corollary cultural politics embedded in statements made by volunteer tourists such as Martin who suggests that after Thailand, he plans to volunteer in India, and then Africa. To contextualize and highlight the significance of these articulations, I
examine the ‘geography of compassion’ in volunteer tourism and situate Martin’s and other volunteer tourists’ statements within the broader context of neoliberalism and modern humanitarianism.

Volunteer tourism is one of the fastest growing alternative tourism markets in the world (Brown 2005; Tomazos & Butler 2010). Annually, more than 1.6 million globally conscious individuals pay to participate in short-term (less than 6 months) humanitarian or conservation projects. Volunteer tourists combine travel or ‘seeing’ with volunteering or ‘saving’ people and environments in social, environmental or economic development projects at any point during their holiday (Wearing 2001). Approximately 80% of all volunteer tourists are female and 56% of all volunteers are between 20 and 29 years old (TRAM 2008). The volunteer tourism market is estimated at 1.6 billion dollars and counting (Wearing 2001; TRAM 2008). I focus on international, rather than domestic volunteer tourists in Thailand because despite the growing participation by Asian nationals (Hindman 2011), most volunteer tourists continue to come from Western countries – defined here as Europe and its colonial manifestations in the United States, Australia and New Zealand – and volunteer in so-called developing countries as defined by the United Nations (TRAM 2008; United Nations: Population Division 2009; Keese 2011).

In this paper, I argue that volunteer tourism in developing countries reflects and contributes to the continued expansion of neoliberalism. As such, the background to and implications of the emergence of volunteer tourism as a form of alternative consumption is examined. This paper focuses explicitly on humanitarian-oriented volunteer tourism which should be distinguished from conservation, research and educational volunteer tourism where different political, economic and ideological issues are implicated. Humanitarian-oriented volunteer tourism, it may be suggested, ‘is not simply reflective of global neoliberalization, but is in fact an important constitutive element which expands and deepens processes of neoliberalization, especially in the South’ (Duffy & Moore 2010: 743). I contend that alternative or new tourism in particular, with its shared concern for development and ‘local people’ as well as environmental, economic and sociocultural impacts (Mowforth & Munt 2009: 98; Tomazos & Cooper 2011), works to privatize and commoditize development discourse as well as global justice agendas. As David Harvey notes, neoliberalism has emerged as an ethic in itself that foregrounds market-mediated relations of exchange. This neoliberal ethic ‘holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market’ (Harvey 2005: 3). Hence, it has given rise to an emerging cosmopolitan morality that hails the new moral consumer (Levy & Sznaider 2004; Pogge 2011). This morality has been built up around humanitarianism which is about ‘how the West understands and acts out a sense of moral responsibility toward the impoverished parts of the world and their threatened inhabitants’ (Tester 2010: vii). In this way, I argue that volunteer tourism is one link in a broader chain of the expansion of neoliberal moral economies.
In the second section of the paper, I ethnographically illustrate how an identifiable ‘geography of compassion’ has emerged within volunteer tourism. Where and to whom volunteer tourists direct their compassion is reflective of and expands tendencies of modern humanitarianism. Humanitarianism is understood here as ‘an imaginary of moral relationships with social and cultural conditions of existence’ (Tester 2010: viii). If, as Keith Tester (2010) points out, extended imagination is culturally constructed, then to understand contemporary culture we need to examine contemporary media as the two are intimately entangled. To this end, I highlight the parallel geography of compassion in celebrity humanitarianism and volunteer tourism – a geography which seems to culminate in Africa. As observed elsewhere, Africa is described by many Western volunteers as an undifferentiated construct that includes the entire continent (Mathers 2010). Additionally, I show how this geography maps onto the Third World child – the primary object of Western volunteer tourists’ compassion and the dominant iconography of the global south (Manzo 2008; Mathers 2010; Tester 2010; Keese 2011). Ultimately, I seek to illustrate how the geography of compassion in volunteer tourism presents many critical questions about the intersection of neoliberalism, humanitarianism, tourism and development in developing countries.

Neoliberalism and the Moralization of Tourism

Tourism’s appropriation of humanitarianism has reinvigorated debates over responsible tourism development. As a type of ‘development tourism,’ volunteer tourism is at the center of new concerns over the ethical consumption of tourism experiences (Spencer 2010). These concerns build upon the broader concern with the ethics of development, humanitarianism and the moralization of tourism more generally (Butcher 2003; Tomazos & Cooper 2011). This is, in part, because the political nature of development is further magnified by its incorporation in tourism – especially Third World tourism – where the power dynamics between ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’ may be especially salient. Additionally, tourism’s role in development is a vivid example of the continued privatization and neoliberalization of development more generally. Following James Ferguson, I understand neoliberalism as both an ‘art of government’ and a ‘class-based ideological project’ where the focus has been progressively transposed from the state to the individual and community (Ferguson 2010: 166). Neoliberal art of governance has privileged the role of unregulated market exchange and privatized social services. As a class-based ideological project, the culture and logic of neoliberalism has penetrated into our everyday lives and interactions (Jenkins 2005). The various manifestations of this logic are one reason why neoliberalism continues to be hotly debated in academic circles where scholars have already forecast a postneoliberal era (Peck et al. 2010).

Despite the overlapping and contradictory uses of the concept (Ferguson 2010), the intensification of neoliberalism since the mid-1980s has been met with a parallel
growth in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Slim 1997; Dolhinow 2005; Harvey 2005; Barnett & Land 2007; Duffy 2008; Hart 2008). It is noted, for example, that there has been a proliferation of ‘de facto government carried out by an extraordinary swarm of NGOs, voluntary organizations, and private foundations’ and ‘social policy and nation-state . . . [have been], to a very significant degree, decoupled’ (Ferguson 2010: 168). As one materialization of this decoupling, the professionalization of the voluntary sector has become a key apparatus of the neoliberal project where it contributes ‘to the co-option, incorporation, and neutralization of alternative ideologies and ways of being’ (Jenkins 2005: 614). Alternative consumption – including touristic consumption – has been at the forefront of this expansion. It is within this milieu that volunteer tourism has emerged (McGehee 2002; McGehee & Santos 2005; Sin 2010). This milieu is laden with contradictions in that the implied resistance to neoliberal economic policies is often coupled with a neoliberal cultural logic of commodification, privatization and deregulation (Lyons et al. 2012).

Hence, as Rosaleen Duffy and Lorraine Moore (2010) make clear, tourism both deepens and extends neoliberalism by opening up new frontiers of privatization. In this way, volunteer tourism intensifies and extends neoliberalism through the privatization and commodification of development and global justice agendas. Notably, NGOs, which have emerged, as part of the expansion of the voluntary sector (Bebbington et al. 2008; Harvey 2009), are the primary agents in the expansion of volunteer tourism as a development strategy (Wearing 2001; Wearing & McDonald 2002; Lipman 2006; Conran 2011).

NGOs throughout Southeast Asia and beyond have appropriated volunteer tourism as a seemingly ideal form of alternative tourism development (McGehee 2002; Simpson 2004). Additionally, it has been shown that global justice and volunteer tourism advocates and participants support similar social and environmental causes (McGehee & Norman 2001; McGehee 2002; McGehee & Santos 2005; Higgins-Desbiolles 2008). This is in part because NGOs can effectively link the financial capital of environmentally and socially conscious individuals from the West to their economic, social and environmental goals. Additionally, the discourses of environmental sustainability, cultural survival and poverty reduction can be readily capitalized on. In this way, volunteer tourism has emerged – albeit contradictorily – as both an expression of resistance to and an extension of neoliberalism and its attendant cultural logic.

Consuming Cosmopolitan Morality

Individualizing discourses of the sentimental, moral consumer have proliferated within the cultural logic and economic practices of neoliberalism. These discourses may be most conspicuous in what are broadly referred to as moral economies where there is a focus on the individual compassionate ‘citizen consumer’ (Jenkins 2005) and corollary social justice and environmental conservation narratives. These narratives
have been progressively co-opted by the alternative – albeit increasingly mainstream – market because of the moral values that they seemingly evoke (Bryant & Goodman 2004). Similar to fair trade and other alternative consumer products, volunteer tourism is one link in a broader integration of alternative development within the new moral economies (Goodman 2004). Within these new moral economies, consumption has increasingly become the new activism (Mowforth et al. 2008; Mowforth & Munt 2009).

The moral economy of alternative consumption, including touristic consumption, illustrates the professionalization of the voluntary sector. Kate Simpson notes how within the neoliberal marketplace, the gap year and its associated forms of volunteer tourism have been progressively professionalized. Since 2000, ‘the “gap year” has changed from a radical activity, dominated by charities and inspired by travel of the hippie generation, to an institutionally accepted commercial gap year industry which helps form new citizens for a global age’ (Simpson 2005: 447). Through an examination of the intersection of professionalization and the neoliberal marketplace, the progressive penetration of market control on our personal, political and emotional selves has intensified (Bondi 2005; Jenkins 2005). For example, the rhetoric of compassion that mediates the volunteer tourism experience signifies the expansion of neoliberalism par excellence. In the United States, for example, Lauren Berlant shows how ‘in asking individuals and local institutions to take up the obligation to ameliorate the suffering that used to be addressed by the state, compassionate conservatives see themselves as moral actors’ (Berlant 2004: 3–4). In this way, the role of compassion in contemporary politics may be essentially a conservative reaction to structural inequality.

Additionally, as a unique ‘product’ within the new moral economies, volunteer tourism brings together the producer (host community members) and the consumer (volunteer tourists). Through the ‘de-fetishization’ of the production process, volunteer tourism facilitates the opportunity to realize the Fair Trade industry’s broader goal of reconnecting ‘producers and consumers economically, politically, and psychologically through the creation of a transnational moral economy’ (Goodman 2004: 891). Hence, within these new moral economies, there is a corresponding link between alternative tourists and alternative consumers as they are participants in what Raymond Bryant and Michael Goodman refer to as a ‘solidarity seeking’ commodity culture which emphasizes social justice through consumption (Bryant & Goodman 2004: 344).

While there is nothing new about suggesting that people feel responsible to those beyond their own borders, there is something decidedly new about the broadening range and increasing intensity at which these motivations materialize within increasingly transnational commodity and commodified landscapes. It is now commonplace to find moral consumer items in supermarkets, coffee shops and clothing stores. As a result of this expansion, alternative consumption has taken on new meanings as an increasingly visible symbol of seemingly political participation. Through the
commodification of alternative development, Michael Goodman notes how fair trade has gone ‘pop.’

While the moral economies in which these alternative consumer products emerge may have positive implications at the local level (Ferguson 2010), on a structural level, they also work to sentimentalize and depoliticize development by turning the question of structural inequality into a question of individual (consumer) morality (Conran 2011). This is because the co-opting of global justice agendas such as environmentalism, human rights and fair trade by the market tends to produce apolitical responses to political problems. In volunteer tourism, these responses are further exacerbated by childhood iconography where children are the primary benefactors of humanitarian-oriented volunteer tourism. This is because children tend to evoke sympathy rather than active, political action (Manzo 2008; Mathers 2010). In this way, the sentimental response neutralizes the political response that the amelioration of chronic poverty and structural violence against the poor necessitates.

Within and as part of the broader expansion of moral economies, volunteer tourism has become an increasingly popular way for individuals to resist neoliberal ideologies and become international humanitarians. Most people cannot commit their lives or bank accounts to long-term volunteer projects. Because of this, there has been a recent explosion of the range of humanitarian organizations and projects that are suited for short-timers (Simpson 2005). As a recent TIME Magazine article on volunteer tourism reports: ‘Getting in touch with your inner Angelina Jolie is easier than it used to be!’ (Fitzpatrick 2007). In myriad ways, it is exactly celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, Madonna and George Clooney who have made international volunteering sexy! Correspondingly, they have also helped to map out the geography of compassion in volunteer tourism.

**Methodological Context**

The arguments presented in this paper are based on 15 months of multisited fieldwork (Marcus 1995) that I conducted between 2006 and 2009 at three nonprofit NGOs that use volunteer tourism as a social and economic development strategy including English Teachers Abroad, Friendship with Thailand and Borderless Volunteers (pseudonyms). English Teachers Abroad is an international NGO that recruits volunteers to teach English to children at impoverished elementary schools. English Teachers Abroad, Chiang Mai, sent volunteers to a number of rural schools including an orphanage school for ethnic minority children 15 km outside of Chiang Mai. Friendship with Thailand sends volunteers to a number of volunteer sites including a women and children’s shelter, HIV/AIDS orphanage and temple schools. Borderless Volunteers facilitates volunteers’ stay in a rural village 50 km outside of the city center where they help to develop ecotourism by teaching English to the community members, building nature trails and developing environmental education programs. I chose these NGOs for this research because they represent a range of volunteer...
tourism opportunities in Chiang Mai. As such, I had the opportunity to compare and contrast the volunteer tourism experience in multiple contexts. I split my time evenly between each of the three NGOs.

As a form of methodological triangulation (Decrop 2004; Denzin 2006), I used several research methods including participant observation, semistructured interviews and mental mapping exercises that I conducted among 40 volunteer tourists. I used ethnographic methods in order to collect qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions and interests of the volunteers. This type of ‘thick description’ is best achieved through ethnographic, qualitative methods (Geertz 1973). I interviewed each of the 40 volunteers one time until a data saturation point was reached (Bernard 2006; Creswell 2009). As is typical in tourism research, the time frame by which I could interview volunteers was limited by the length of their stay. To accommodate their limited schedule, I often conducted interviews at the schools and orphanages where the volunteers worked as well as bars and restaurants that they frequented. My familiarity with the volunteers ranged from a few days to several weeks of interaction at the volunteer sites.

The volunteers were recruited using convenience sampling: when it was convenient, I asked volunteers at the volunteer sites that I was conducting the research at if I could interview them. I did not select participants based on any particular criteria except their availability and interest to participate in the interview. None of the volunteers that I asked to do the interview rejected my request – perhaps illustrating the extent to which these volunteers hoped to demonstrate their ‘embodied reflexive selves’ (Sin 2011) as well as their ‘hero’ like qualities (Tomazos & Butler 2010). Of the 40 volunteers who I interviewed, 39 were citizens of Western countries and one was a citizen of Japan (see Figure 1). It is notable that 74% of the volunteers.

![Figure 1. Distribution of the volunteer tourists by nationality.](image)
in my research were women. Additionally, more than half of the volunteers were between the ages of 19 and 26 (see Figure 2). More than 65% of the volunteers were recent high school or college graduates or current college students. As a result, their personal income was frequently less than US $10,000 per year. Yet, of the 40 volunteers interviewed, 26 disclosed their parents’ income. Of the 26 volunteers who disclosed their parents’ income, more than 63% earned more than US $90,000 and 23% earned more than US $200,000 annually. Out of the 40 volunteers, 17% had previously volunteered abroad and 40% had volunteered in their home country.

I digitally recorded and transcribed all of my semistructured interviews. Each semistructured interview was based on a set of questions that address their volunteers’ interests in and motivations for participation in volunteer tourism. Questions also addressed how they perceived their own and their counterparts’ benefits from the experience. For example, I asked the volunteers what the most beneficial aspect of their experience was as well as how they thought volunteer tourism benefited the Thai host community members. I analyzed this data using an inductive approach whereby I identified consistent patterns in my research participants’ articulations of their experience. I used grounded theory analysis to develop my main arguments (Nash 2004; Phillimore & Goodson 2004; Wilson 2004; Charmez 2006; Leopold 2011). Additionally, I used informant triangulation to determine where and how international volunteer tourists’ perceptions of their experience, motivations and interests in volunteer tourism converge (Decrop 1999: 157). I also conducted data triangulation on my field notes whereby I compared my interview transcript with my participant observation and interview notes that I took during and after each encounter with research participants. Additionally, I conducted multiple iterations
of coding and investigator triangulation by recoding the same transcript on different days. I also had several colleagues validate my interpretations of my coding.

During the course of my fieldwork, I took on several roles: I was a researcher, volunteer, NGO coordinator, translator and friend with many of the volunteers as well as the host community members and NGO coordinators. My friendships with my research collaborators complicated the research process. I often simultaneously maintained multiple positions. My research collaborators were fully aware that I was conducting research on volunteer tourism and that I was documenting my observations and interactions on the notepad that I kept in my pocket. While the fact that I was conducting research may not have been explicitly noticeable while I was acting as a participant observer, my role as a researcher became explicit when I asked my research collaborators to interview them about their experience. As a result, the data presented in this paper are mediated by the multiple subjectivities I embodied throughout the duration of the research (Tucker 2009; Ren et al. 2010).

The Geography of Compassion

Volunteer tourism is a compassionate form of touristic consumption that has emerged within the broader moralization of tourism (Butcher 2003; Tomazos & Cooper 2011). Volunteer tourists are often motivated to volunteer abroad because they feel compassion for others and want to give back to society (Brown 2005; Raymond 2008; Raymond & Hall 2008a; Tomazos & Butler 2010; Chen & Chen 2011). Rather than being a simple emotion, compassion is a highly mediated, political and complex experience (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2004). Candace Volger, for example, points out how ‘of the many species of tenderness directed toward others’ troubles, compassion falls squarely in the range of affective orientations with a built-in clean-hands clause’ (Volger 2004: 30). Others have suggested that compassion is probably rooted in our biological heritage. Yet, as Martha Nussbaum (2001) notes, this does not mean it is without thought. Rather, she argues that ‘since compassion contains thought, it can be educated.’ In many ways, volunteer tourism emerges within the West’s education about the legacy of imperialism and its role in international development. Additionally, volunteer tourists are also educated within the volunteer tourism experience where, as Simpson (2005) notes, participants ostensibly legitimize their knowledge of Others which often reinforces uneven development.

When volunteer tourists talked about why they chose to volunteer in Thailand, they often suggested that they knew they wanted to volunteer in a ‘Third World’ country. Jonas, for example, a 21-year-old Norwegian volunteer, commented: ‘I knew that I wanted to volunteer in a Third World country because I wanted to make the most difference with my money and time.’ This was in part because, like most consumers, volunteer tourists want to get the most for their money. Because of this, they go where they believe they can ‘really make a difference.’ As part of my broader
research methods including participant observation and semistructured interviews, I asked the volunteers to participate in a mental mapping exercise in which they would color a map of the world with three colors that corresponded to where they were most interested, least interested and neutral about volunteering. It should be noted that this methodology sheds light on the perceptions of people who have already chosen to volunteer abroad rather than domestically and that a similar activity among domestic volunteer tourists may elicit different results.

This mental mapping exercise seemed to substantiate my earlier observations that most volunteers wanted to volunteer in a ‘Third World’ country rather than their home countries because they believed that is where they would do the ‘most good.’ Not surprisingly, in the mental mapping exercise, the volunteer tourists chose to color their own countries as well as most other Western countries blue, meaning that they were least interested in volunteering there. They explained that they could not make a real impact in ‘developed’ countries. For example, Maike, a 20-year-old German volunteer, explained to me: ‘If I were to volunteer in Germany, why should I do that? You can’t make a real impact there.’ Additionally, volunteer tourists colored most of the countries they could identify as ‘developing’ in red, meaning that they were most motivated to volunteer there. When I asked the volunteers to expand on their choices, they often commented matter-of-factly that ‘the Third World’ is where the most help is needed.’ This exercise supports my ethnographic data where volunteers frequently suggested to me that Thailand was a good ‘Third World’ country to volunteer in because in many ways, it ‘wasn’t really like the Third World,’ yet they could still make a lot of impact because ‘technically it was.’ Angelica, for example, a 20-year-old American volunteer, noted: ‘I wanted to volunteer in a Third World country that was not too poor but not too developed either. Thailand seemed like the perfect choice. People seem really happy here.’

The volunteers also commonly suggested that, after Thailand, they planned to go to Africa. For example, Angelica further stated: ‘Maybe next time I will go to Africa. But for my first time I thought Thailand would be good.’ To further explore this theme, I asked the volunteers to name three places where – if afforded the opportunity – they would volunteer next. As I expected, given my earlier conversations with many volunteers, the most popular volunteer tourism destination was Africa. A surprising 87.5% or 35 out of 40 of the volunteer tourists suggested that they would like to volunteer in Africa (6 out of 35 volunteers named particular countries within the continent while 29 stated that they would like to volunteer ‘somewhere in Africa’). When I asked them to elaborate on their selections, many suggested that they wanted to volunteer in an Asian Third World country first. After getting their feet wet, so to speak, and if they felt ready for the ‘real thing,’ they would go to Africa. For example, Cindy, a 35-year-old American volunteer tourist, explained to me: ‘Because of the economic growth in Thailand, it is easier to go to a county like this. I think there are more volunteer tourists in Asia. I think more people would go to Asia than to Africa if they haven’t volunteered before. If you want to do a volunteer project, and you don’t have any
experience, it is better to go to Thailand.’ Additionally, Jen, a 24-year-old Australian volunteer tourist, stated: ‘After this I plan to do “real” volunteering in Africa.’

What the consistency of volunteer tourists’ articulations during my participant observations as well as in the semistructured interviews and the mental mapping exercises suggests is that there is an identifiable geography of compassion in volunteer tourism. Throughout my fieldwork, the volunteers regularly suggested how they believed that Thailand was an appropriate ‘first-time’ volunteer experience but that subsequent to this experience, they planned to move on to ‘more serious’ volunteering – most notably Africa. George, a 62-year-old Canadian volunteer, for example, explained to me during a semistructured interview: ‘We have friends who went to India. They want to go back there again. We may go with them but Caroline and I really want to go to Africa. But we aren’t sure how safe it is. Plus, we are old. We need to be sure about the accommodation first. Thailand was perfect for us because we were able to have everything even though we are in a Third World country . . . If we cannot make it to Africa I suppose we will go to India next.’ Similar statements were made by other volunteers during my participant observations and interviews. For example, when I asked Sande, a 22-year-old Norwegian volunteer, what her parents said when she told them she wanted to volunteer in Thailand, she explained: ‘They, well . . . they liked it and they liked that I was going to Thailand because they were a bit scared that I was going to go to Africa – so they liked this volunteer project because they thought it was good and safe. I think Thailand is a good place to start . . . and my parents would not sponsor me to go to Africa alone – also I was a bit scared of going there by myself. But I hope to go there at some point. Maybe next year.’ Highlighting the above statements is not to suggest that all volunteer tourists want to volunteer in Thailand first – or even that they all want to go to Africa. This research was carried among primarily first-time volunteers who chose Thailand among all other possibilities. Thus, the results of this study already reflect the perceptions of a specific sector of the volunteer tourism market. What is interesting is that many of the volunteers in Thailand saw their experience as a ‘jumping off’ point for seemingly more radical and ‘risky’ volunteer tourism experiences in Africa. This is not to say that most volunteers will actually volunteer in Africa (although it is notable that over the last decade, volunteer tourism has exploded onto the international NGO scene throughout the continent). Yet, these statements do highlight the discourse surrounding particular countries and regions over others.

Volunteer tourists’ geographical imaginary, for example, consistently reflects the homogenous category of Africa. This may be in part because Africa has been constructed as the embodiment of common-sense humanitarianism in the Western imaginary. As Tester points out: ‘The imperial legacy explains the geographical specificity of common-sense humanitarianism. While disasters happen throughout the world, the focus of common-sense humanitarianism is consistently on “Africa”’ (2010: ix). Additionally, the hegemonic representation of the West as giver and Africa as the
receiver works to construct the continent, not as a political actor, but as an aid recipient that needs the West (Mathers 2010). In her study of American volunteers in South Africa, Mathers observes how their ‘stories became part of a national project playing out in mainstream media that was increasingly representing Africa as the iconic place for Americans to do good’ (2010: 2). Hence, similar to other forms of common-sense humanitarianism, volunteer tourism ‘appears to rest of myths and, more insidiously, the vestiges of a distinctly imperial mindset, which establishes the West as the only right actor in the world’ (Tester 2010: ix). Importantly, awareness of this legacy has also, at least in part, been the impetus for the expansion of volunteer tourism in developing countries. Volunteer tourism has become a popular way for young Westerners to negotiate their own identities as subjects of imperial nations (Mathers 2010).

The imperial legacy upon which the geography of compassion has emerged in volunteer tourism is similarly implicated in moral consumer products. As is pointed out: “how far we care” as well as the diverse processes by which we go about “caring” seems to resonate well with . . . alternative consumption’ (Bryant & Goodman 2004: 349–350). This may be because how we care has become increasingly bound up in consumption. Through alternative consumption, including volunteer tourism, geographical knowledge is constructed around who and where we should direct our care. For example, a ‘spatial dynamic of concern’ is produced within fair trade networks (Smith 1998; Goodman 2004). In this way, there is a clear link between the media, culture, consumption and geographies of compassion. As Angelina, a 24-year-old volunteer from the United States, explained: ‘volunteering in developing countries has become really popular. There are even commercials for it on T.V. now. I have several friends who took alternative spring breaks to Guatemala and Africa last year.’ Tester comments on this phenomena and highlights the role of the media in creating a geographical imaginary that ostensibly connects and motivates the First World ‘giver’ to act compassionately to the Third World ‘receiver.’ For example, he explains: ‘The linkage between humanitarianism and culture is intrinsic and actually essential because humanitarianism means paying moral attention to others who are beyond one’s own immediate sphere of existence, and therefore it requires and involves an imagination about the world, about the relationship between the near and the far, “us” and “them”’ (Tester 2010: vii).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to expand on the geography of compassion as it is articulated by host community members, it is interesting to note that in my research, Thai host community members overwhelmingly suggested that if given the opportunity, they would volunteer in Thailand. This interest in domestic volunteering is in stark contrast with the volunteer tourists who seek out what I refer to as ‘humanitarian cosmopolitanism’ – or a desire to ‘see and save the world’ through the lens of humanitarianism. This lens, I suggest, seems to be focused on the ‘Third World’ child as the primary object of compassion.
Third World Child as Object of Compassion

How the genealogy of international humanitarianism has unfolded and how it has produced the ‘Third World’ child as the predominant objects of compassion demand further analysis. For example, the ‘view of childhood as an imperfect and inferior state on the way to adulthood was recycled in “a wide range of references to savages which employ the child image from the early nineteenth century onwards”’ (Jahoda 1999: 143). Additionally, ‘The colonial principle of guardianship implicitly contained a parent–child metaphor, with its underlying message that colonised peoples require guidance from “civilized” Europeans in the same way that minors need guidance from parents’ (Manzo 2008: 649–650).

As the most obvious predecessor of volunteer tourism, missionaries have followed a perceptibly similar geography of compassion since the mid-nineteenth century where they have tended to target marginalized children (Wearing 2001; Brown 2005; Lyons & Wearing 2008; McGehee 2008; Raymond 2008). Elizabeth Hoffman (1998) points out how missionaries often went to foreign continents to ‘uplift’ native people. In what Jan Pieterse calls ‘missionary subculture,’ images of children dominate visual representations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What may be most indicative of this iconography is what is not visible – namely elder kin (Pierese 1992; Manzo 2008). This absence brings up important questions about the persistent cultural politics of invisibility in international humanitarianism. For example, adult men are rarely the explicit benefactors of volunteer tourism. As Manzo argues: ‘When isolated anonymous children appear without recourse to any indigenous kinship structures or community support mechanisms, an impression of their vulnerability is encouraged. At the same time, the visible connotations of protection and rescue suggested by the presence of colonial missionaries and nuns and (more recently) of contemporary aid workers magnify the power and influence of external forces’ (2008: 643).

Volunteer tourism, as a modern form of humanitarianism, may be seen as a secular extension of the mission excursion and has been referred to as mini-missions or ‘mission lite’ (Brown & Morrison 2003; Brown 2005). For example, the parent–child metaphor was blatant in my research where all three NGOs primarily facilitated volunteer work with children at schools, women’s shelters and HIV/AIDS orphanages. Additionally, more than 60% of the volunteers explicitly stated that they wanted to work with children. They often suggested that they would be able to make a bigger impact on children’s, rather than the adults’ lives. For example, Carol, a 65-year-old Canadian volunteer, commented: ‘I knew I wanted to work with the children because they are the future. There are so many good children here who need someone to take care of them. They need to be hugged and loved. These children are the next generation in Thailand. If you want to help Thailand progress you need to work with the children.’

Similar to childhood iconography, the focus on the Third World child in volunteer tourism works to ‘legitimise the foundational idea of all western-based
development – that the global south is inevitably better off with ongoing interventions (in the name of development) than it would be without them’ (Manzo 2008: 652). The predominant role of children in humanitarianism also highlights the pervasive link-age between the colonial iconography of childhood and savagery and the more recent emergence of the child as a symbol for universal human rights (Manzo 2008: 635). In the NGO context, ‘the iconography of childhood operates like a shared brand logo that advertises NGOs’ humanitarian ideals,’ and harks back to colonial metaphors of infantilism and savagery that mediate contemporary development images and practices that are organized around the child (Manzo 2008: 651). Yet, the child is an important instrument by which NGOs attract volunteer tourists. This is in part because the im-pression given of children’s total dependence on outside forces for protection and care can work to the advantage of NGOs by inflating donors’ sense of external efficacy, authority and power (Manzo 2008: 643–644). This impression of total dependence on outsiders was consistently called upon by the NGO coordinators and the volunteers who had regular conversations about the continued need for Western volunteers. Jen, for example, a 31-year-old German volunteer, explained: ‘I see that there is a need here for things like education, English language and sanitation. I think we are making some progress but I am worried that it will not continue if the volunteers stop coming.’ As a metaphoric reminder of colonialism and a key signifier for humanitarian values, the use of the child as the predominant object of compassion in volunteer tourism presents additional paradoxes within volunteer tourism – where the privati-zation of development and corollary expansion of neoliberal global capitalism create a dual set of contradictions. Just as ‘neoliberalism, through tourism, reconfigures and redesigns nature for global consumption (West & Carrier 2004)’ (Duffy & Moore 2010: 743), so too does it reconfigure and redesign development. Within these spaces of development, Africa and the ‘Third World’ child have become ostensibly ‘natural’ objects of humanitarianism through their corollary identification as quintessential Others against which the West constructs its own image (Said 1978; Mathers 2010). Hence, Mathers observes how within the broader expansion of moral economies within humanitarianism, there has been a growth of this trope within popular culture where people ‘don’t even have to go to Africa in order to save it; they just have to buy a T-shirt at The Gap on behalf of (Product) RED’ (2010: 5). As noted above, the representations of the media and advertising of alternative consumer products are essential to the mapping out of the geography of compassion in volunteer tourism. In addition to these entanglements, celebrities now play an increasingly conspic-uous role in this broader engagement with common-sense humanitarianism in the West.

Celebrity Humanitarianism

Western audiences have witnessed an unprecedented growth of celebrities in in-ternational humanitarianism over the last decade. Commenting on this trend in a
New York Times article, *The Rock Star’s Burden*, travel writer, Paul Theroux writes: ‘Africa seems unfinished and so different from the rest of the world, a landscape on which a person can sketch a new personality, it attracts mythomaniacs, people who wish to convince the world of their worth (December 15, 2005)’ (Mathers 2010: 194). Despite this and related critiques, a ‘cult of celebrity’ has developed around humanitarianism to the point where ‘United Nations’ children’s agency UNICEF’ has commented that ‘when most people think of the UN now they think of Angelina Jolie on a crusade, not the work that goes on in the field . . . celebrity is at the heart of every UNICEF campaign these days and the association is being sold incredibly cheaply (quoted in McDougall 2006)’ (Manzo 2008: 646). While celebrity humanitarianism has become increasingly prominent over the last half decade, celebrity aid dates back to the mid-twentieth century with the first ambassador to UNICEF, Danny Kaye and the Beatles 1963 benefit concert in support of Oxfam’s ‘no child should die of hunger’ campaign in Liverpool (Manzo 2008).

The influence of celebrities in developing our moral imaginations and directing our knowledge of those beyond our own borders (Nussbaum 2001; Tester 2010) is highlighted in the notable parallels that exist between the growth of celebrity humanitarian efforts in Africa and the continent as a choice volunteer destination for 87.5% of the volunteer tourists in this study. It may be suggested that the prominent role of celebrities in Africa, in part, impels the geography of compassion in volunteer tourism. In a similar vein, the onslaught of images of female celebrities and their adopted African babies have helped to map out the geography of compassion for volunteer tourists (Tester 2010). Within this theater of popular humanitarianism, the 20 something female has taken center stage. Young women around the West – and increasingly throughout Asia – have taken up international development and humanitarianism. As celebrity’s most allegiant audience, young women have dutifully appropriated this role where they comprise more than 80% of all volunteer tourists. While these parallels may seem immaterial, for millions of stargazers in the West, celebrity humanitarianism may be the only form of humanitarianism that they will ever engage with.

**Conclusion**

Volunteer tourism – as one link in the broader chain of expansion of moral economies – works to map out a geography of compassion that extends imperial legacies of colonialism and uneven development. Within the limited temporal and geographical scope of this research, Africa is widely considered the most ‘authentic’ volunteer site and the Third World child has become a dominant signifier of modern humanitarianism. This is not to suggest a universalism. Rather, it is merely to highlight the parallels between these particular findings and the longer lineage of this hegemonic geography. Africa has long served as an Other against which the West has defined itself. Additionally, the prominent role of the Third World child in volunteer tourism reflects the imperial legacy of the parent–child relationship. Arguably, in the contemporary postcolonial
era, childhood iconography ‘can always be read as an infantilizing spatial metaphor of the majority of the world’ (Manzo 2008: 651). Yet, because of the symbolic power of the child and guardian, this colonial iconography continues to be further popularized in the media, most recently through celebrity humanitarianism. The notable links between female celebrities and their adopted African children and volunteer tourists who are overwhelmingly female and seek to volunteer ‘somewhere’ on the continent is not surprising. This occurrence has emerged out of complex, historical, political and cultural entanglements that have worked to designate the Third World child as the predominant foci for Western humanitarianism.

Despite the critique that I have presented here, I do not mean to suggest that the geography of compassion that has emerged in volunteer tourism is purposefully or only adverse. As Harvey notes: ‘The widespread support for “doing good in the world” and for engaging in charitable philanthropic works . . . may be misguided or misplaced . . . but it cannot easily be construed as merely a mask for some nefarious purpose’ (2009: 8). Rather, it is to argue that the ways in which we participate in humanitarianism – like the corollary role of alternative consumption – have worked to depoliticize global justice agendas. While both celebrities and alternative consumption draw attention to global justice agendas, the politics of the approach needs to be expanded to address the broader structural inequalities on which these agendas are based. Bryant and Goodman, for example, suggest that alternative commodity cultures are one strategy in which ‘Northern consumers are able to care over long distances – even if such caring is, in the end, hardly about behaving in a systematically different manner that might substantially alter the political or economic status quo’ (2004: 349). While it is unclear what the actual implications of these moral markets will be, what is clear is that these economies have in many ways mainstreamed environmental and global justice agendas. Yet, given the lack of structural-political change, the implications of this form of resistance remain dubious. This is in part because it allows consumers to ‘“tune in but drop out’ of both conventional global economies and more demanding forms of resistance to social injustice and environmental degradation’ (Bryant & Goodman 2004: 360).

Therefore, what is the alternative to the current privatization and depoliticization of geographies of compassion in the West? What role can volunteer tourism play in helping to rematerialize political action? In regard to celebrity humanitarianism, Manzo facetiously asks: ‘What if celebrities who want to do more than simply rattle the fundraising tins (as the Beatles were photographed doing backstage) were asked to turn the spotlight on aid’s failures instead of successes?’ (2008: 646). Similarly, we may ask: what if volunteer tourism and alternative consumer products more generally, focused instead on the deleterious policies and practices of Western nations and its citizens rather than praise the compassionate Western consumer for ‘doing their part?’ Future research that addresses these and related questions of neoliberalism, humanitarianism and the cultural politics of compassion within tourism would be valuable contributions to the literature. In addressing these issues, what we may find is that the answers we need are not sentimental – they are political.
This is not to suggest that we throw the baby out with the bathwater. Building on recent tourism research that calls for praxis and a move beyond critique to address the positive potential of a situation (Raymond & Hall 2008b), I suggest that the mainstreaming of global justice agendas can be the first step in the right direction as it has the possibility to recruit support for and open up new terrain for political action (Barnett et al. 2005). Yet, this potential does not mean that these strategies are beyond critique. Rather, they reflect a fundamental question of our time: ‘How to contest neoliberalism from within – with the implicit assumption that the neoliberal paradigm has incorporated voices of dissent to the extent that there are no alternative spaces from which to challenge it’ (Jenkins 2005: 614). This is problematic at the core of the geography of compassion in volunteer tourism where – in a neoliberal sleight of hand – morality meets the market.

References

M. Mostafanezhad


Notes on Contributor

Dr Mary Mostafanezhad, PhD, will join the University of Otago in June of 2012 as a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) of Tourism. Her research interests include the cultural politics and political economy of tourism development. She has published on topics such as volunteer, cultural and ecotourism in northern Thailand.