



Volunteer tourism and the popular humanitarian gaze



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ABSTRACT

With an increasing number of tourists ‘vacationing like Brangelina’ (Fitzpatrick, 2007), volunteer tourism has become one of the fastest growing niche tourism markets in the world. In this article I develop the popular humanitarian gaze as an analytic to describe the geopolitical assemblage of institutions, cultural practices and actors (e.g. celebrity humanitarians, alternative consumers and volunteer tourists) that play a critical role in the privatization and depoliticization of popular humanitarian interventions. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among three non-governmental organizations that use volunteer tourism as a social and economic development strategy as well as popular media texts, I argue that the popular humanitarian gaze co-produces and extends geopolitical discourses of North-South relations that naturalize political, economic and social inequality. Volunteer tourism in particular, I argue, perpetuates a popular humanitarian gaze that reframes contemporary humanitarianism as an empathetic gesture of commoditized concern.

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1. Introduction

I am at a women's shelter 15 km outside of Chiang Mai city in Northern Thailand and I notice a red *songthaew*—a Thai-style truck taxi—pull through the gate. A group of pale skinned female volunteer tourists are squeezed on the benches that line the bed of the truck. Several of the young women are already peering through their cameras as they drive into the shelter. Their lenses are focused on a group of smiling Thai, Burmese and Vietnamese children who stare at them as they approach the parking area. Four of the children are not wearing pants and have snot dripping down their faces. The volunteer tourists seem undisturbed as they shuffle down from the *songthaew* to pick up the children. A 22-year-old German girl motions to her friend, “Take my photo!” as she picks up one of the young girls off the swing. The other women are also taking pictures of the children on the makeshift jungle gym next to the gate. One woman runs up to the group of children playing in the tires beyond the jungle gym and sits in the middle of them. She motions her friends to take a picture of her. Surrounded by several children smiling and playing games, she then picks one of the children up and motions to her friend to take another photo of her with the child. Undoubtedly, these images will become Facebook profile pictures. While the new volunteers continue to take photos outside with the children, another group of young Australian women in their mid-20s sit at the shelter's computer where they upload their most recent photographs. They sort

through hundreds of photos and comment on how they look in the pictures. They separate the images into those they plan to post and those which could serve as potential profile pictures. This scene is enacted daily in various forms throughout northern Thailand, where since the early 2000s, young people from the Global North began arriving in Chiang Mai as volunteer tourists.

Volunteer tourism is a type of tourism where tourists pay to participate in development or conservation-oriented projects and is now one of the fastest-growing niche tourism markets in the world (Wearing, 2001; Guttentag, 2009). Media reports on this increasingly popular phenomenon point out its likeness to pop philanthropy. A TIME magazine article, “*Vacationing like Brangelina*,” for example, relates the growth of volunteer tourism to the well-known humanitarian work of celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (Fitzpatrick, 2007). The extent to which celebrities inspire volunteer tourists may be impossible to quantify, but the similitude of the narratives is difficult to avoid (Mostafanezhad, 2013b). Commenting on these parallel cultural practices, a recent CNN article, “*Do celebs like Jolie inspire voluntourism?*”, suggests that it is now “hard to think about humanitarian travel without picturing Angelina Jolie and other high-profile volunteers” (Vasquez, 2010).

In Thailand, celebrity humanitarianism was kicked off by the post-tsunami relief and coincided with the expansion of volunteer tourism. Celebrities such as Ricky Martin played an important role in drawing attention to the needs of those affected by the tsunami as well as the possibility of non-celebrity citizens to participate in humanitarian relief. These forms of celebrity (and celebrated)

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cultural practices highlight how popular humanitarian experiences such as volunteer tourism produce a remarkably consistent narrative around the appropriate response to chronic poverty and systemic violence against the poor. In this way, depoliticizing narratives of popular humanitarianism rematerialize within volunteer tourism where a recurring story emerges around the Global North's aesthetic and individuating engagement with poverty in a consumable form in the Global South.

Like other alternative consumption experiences, volunteer tourism draws upon social movement agendas (Bryant and Goodman, 2004). These agendas have in-part, been co-opted by the market through what Jones refers to as the “rise of global work” where volunteer tourists re-imagine their ability to participate in and change global space through their international volunteering experience (Jones, 2008). Others have referred to the “professionalization” of youth travel” (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Simpson, 2005). Simpson, for example, addresses how corporate values and rhetoric are transformed through the “neoliberal market place” (Simpson, 2005, p. 447). Beyond volunteer tourism, supermarkets, clothing stores and coffee shops as well as widespread media attention to pop and celebrity philanthropy have become part and parcel of this expanding set of cultural practices. They also reflect what Žižek refers to as “consumer redemption” (Žižek, 2009), contributing to a commodity fetishism in which the inequality of the encounter is reframed through relatively uniform spectacle of popular humanitarianism. Following Lefebvre (1991), these spaces conceal strategic actions on the part of the humanitarian apparatus as it materializes within commodity and commodified aid oriented activities.

Drawing on emerging research in popular geopolitics as well as assemblage theory, my primary argument is that volunteer tourism is one assemblage component of the popular humanitarian gaze which, I contend, refashions contemporary humanitarianism as an empathetic gesture of commoditized concern (DeLanda, 2006; Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Dittmer, 2013a; Dittmer, 2013b). I develop the popular humanitarian gaze as an analytic to describe the geopolitical assemblage of institutions, cultural practices and actors (e.g. celebrity humanitarians, alternative consumers and volunteer tourists) that play a critical role in the privatization and depoliticization of popular humanitarian interventions. Volunteer tourism in particular, I argue, perpetuates a popular humanitarian gaze that contributes to recurring geopolitical discourses of North–South relations that naturalize political, economic and social inequality.

In the following section I address the theoretical and historical context in which popular humanitarianism emerged as a way to historically and spatially situate the growing popularity of volunteer tourism. I then examine the assembling of institutions, discourses and practices around the popular humanitarian gaze in volunteer tourism through popular media texts as well as ethnographic observations. Drawing on semi-structured interview data, I highlight the role of photographic intimacy and the child as core assembling practices in the volunteer tourism experience in northern Thailand. Finally, I consider how the popular humanitarian gaze as a geopolitical assemblage can be re-assembled to critically rather than aesthetically address broader structural inequalities.

1.1. Theorizing the popular humanitarian gaze

Recent work in popular geopolitics highlights how geopolitical narratives are both subverted and reified in popular culture as well as how audiences respond to these narratives. In this way, average people (e.g. volunteer tourists) are considered political actors (Sharp, 1993; McFarlane and Hay, 2003; Dittmer and Dodds, 2008). Through an ethnographic lens, everyday experiences (e.g. tourist experiences) can shed light on geopolitical practice

(Agnew et al., 2003; Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). Popular geopolitics articulates with assemblage theory which emphasizes assemblage as “a multiplicity that exceeds its component parts” (McFarlane, 2009, p. 561). Li illustrates how assemblage “emphasizes both temporality and spatiality: elements are drawn together at a particular conjuncture only to disperse or realign, and the shape shifts according to the terrain and the angle of vision” (Li, 2007, p. 265). In volunteer tourism these components are assembled through a range of actors that respatialize popular humanitarianism in the West. Assemblage is useful for trying to make sense of volunteer tourism as well as the archeology of the popular humanitarian gaze which would reveal assemblage components ranging from NGOs, celebrities, tourism operators, local and national governments to the media. The analytic of assemblage then allows us to conceptualize volunteer tourism and the component parts of the popular humanitarian gaze as constantly morphing rather than as a fixed structure. Thus, assemblage is not a totalizing plan but a set of culturally conditioned practices that intersect at various nodes. In this way, the analytic of assemblage lends itself to the analysis of volunteer tourism which is constructed in and through various component actors such as development and NGO practitioners, celebrity icons and Facebook friends.

Practices of assemblage in volunteer tourism demonstrate the collectivities, groups and varied agencies of the component whole as well as the incompleteness and continual emergence of the practice. Assemblage is particularly useful here because it helps us to examine how assemblages “produce emergent effects which themselves reshape the assemblage's elements” as well as its “implications for understandings of agency, subjectivity, and systemic change” (Dittmer, 2013a, p. 3). The popular humanitarian gaze as it materializes in volunteer tourism is a composite of disparate elements drawn together through the intersection of at least humanitarianism, celebrity culture and tourism. These composite parts are not unified in a coherent whole, yet together they represent a linked network. Li notes how a key aspect of an assemblage is “its potential to finesse questions of agency by recognizing the situated subjects who do the work of pulling together disparate elements without attributing to them a master-mind or a totalizing plan” (Li, 2007, p. 265). In this way, the individual volunteer tourist—albeit inadvertently—contributes to the assemblage of the popular humanitarian gaze.

The analytic of assemblage allows for a more focused examination of the relationship between micro and macro realities where assemblage components intersect at various spatial scales which are part of multiple, exterior assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). In this way “part of the appeal of assemblages, it would seem, lies in its reading of power as multiple co-existences— assemblages connotes not a central governing power, nor a power distributed equally, but power as plurality in transformation” (McFarlane, 2009, p. 562). Thus, in the context of volunteer tourism assemblage theory can help us tease out the diverse elements of the popular humanitarian gaze where volunteers and host community members interact with each other and NGOs with state organizations, state organizations with supranational organizations, supranational organizations with the media, the media with celebrities and celebrities with corporate sponsors, and so on. These relationships are “linked not in a linear fashion but rhizomatically as ‘reciprocal presuppositions and mutual insertions play themselves out,’” and emphasize “both temporality and spatiality: elements are drawn together at a particular conjuncture only to disperse or realign, and the shape shifts according to the terrain and the angle of vision” (Li, 2007, p. 265). In this way, the analysis of volunteer tourism through an integration of assemblage theory and popular geopolitics contributes to new ways of thinking

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