# Traveling for a cause: Critical examinations of volunteer tourism and social justice

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## Abstract

Over the last decade there has been a rise in 'volunteer tourism' or 'voluntourism,' which is characterized by the combination of travel and volunteering, typically in social or economic development or conversation oriented projects. The papers in this special issue theoretically and empirically examine the dynamic interplay between volunteer tourism and the broader expansion of market-mediated social justice campaigns. Also examined is the potential for volunteer tourism experiences to facilitate myriad implications for the volunteer tourists, volunteer tourism coordinators, and host community members. Positioned against larger transnational trends such as ethical consumerism in tourism, religious mission travel, work and study immersion programs, and academic fieldwork as "volunteer tourism," this issue examines the various implications of volunteer tourism and its supposed benefits to social, charitable, or environmental causes. As such, it provides a theoretically rich analysis of emerging critical research agendas at the intersection of volunteer tourism and social justice. In this introduction, we consider these agendas – focusing on the theoretical themes of neoliberal development, governmentality, geographies of care and responsibility, and the dilemmas found at the frequently encountered intersection of ethics and aesthetics.

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Over the last decade, there has been a rise in volunteer tourism or "voluntourism," which is characterized by the combination of travel and volunteering, typically in social and economic development or conservation-oriented projects. Central to volunteer tourism is the presumption that such ventures can and should bring about positive impacts to host destinations. This rhetoric is mediated by strong overtones of social, justice, pro-poor, green, and eco tourism that highlight the capacity of tourism to make direct and tangible improvements to host communities and/or the natural environment in tourism destinations. From what started off as a niche sector taken up by a small number of tourists, volunteer tourism is now one of the fastest growing tourism markets in the world. Recent studies have estimated that as of 2008, up to 1.6 million people worldwide participate in volunteer tourism, spending between £832 million and £1.3 billion annually (Tourism Research and Marketing (TRAM), 2008). The growth of volunteer tourism is also evidenced by its availability on the World Wide Web—in a review of volunteer tourism, Wearing and McGehee highlighted that "a Google search of the words 'volunteer tourism' on April 17th 2008 returned 230,000 hits; that same search on April 17th 2012, just four years later, returned 4,850,000 hits" (Voluntourism.org, 2008, cited in Wearing and McGehee, 2013).

Volunteer tourism itself is becoming increasingly diversified. What is considered under the banner of "volunteer tourism" now includes a great range of possible destinations, activities, as well as opportunities to work with a range of social and environmental causes. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, volunteer tourism has moved beyond the typical projects of building schools or teaching English in rural villages in "Third World" countries. The industry has grown to include a variety of opportunities from working in orphanages (Guiney and Mostafanezhad, this issue), to volunteering on organic farms (Miller and Mair, this issue), to language immersion courses where the goal is less to teach English to local children but rather to learn Spanish from locals (Everingham, this issue). Such shifts that encompass an ever-widening range of activities in volunteer tourism have meant that it is also becoming increasingly difficult to maintain a singular idea of what we conceptualize as volunteer tourism and its attendant motivations and outcomes. As a result, academic research has approached volunteer tourism as a dynamic and changing industry, andhave primarily focused on several key areas of the practice:

1.  Pre-trip motivations of volunteer tourists and how these are considered to differ from mainstream tourists (see Brown and Lehto, 2005; Brumbaugh, 2010; Callanan and Thomas, 2005; Chen and Chen, 2011; Clemmons, 2010; Grimm and Needham, 2012; Lo and Lee, 2011; Scheyvens, 2012; Sin, 2009; Tomazos and Butler, 2010; Wearing, 2001, 2002; Zavitz and Butz, 2011).
2.  Important works in this area also often consider whether volunteer tourism is motivated by self-interest or altruism (Bakker and Lamoureux, 2008; Brown and Lehto, 2005; Callanan and Thomas, 2005; Fennell, 2006; Lepp, 2008; McGehee et al., 2009; Tomazos and Butler, 2010).
3.  Impacts and outcomes of volunteer tourism at host destinations (see Holmes et al., 2010; Singh and Singh, 2004; Uriely and Reichel, 2000; Uriely et al., 2003) with a significant strand of works identifying issues of power and unequal

socio-economic statuses between hosts and volunteer tourists (see Devereux, 2008; Guttentag, 2009; McGehee and Andereck, 2009; McGehee et al., 2008; Mostafanezhad, 2013; Palacios, 2010; Raymond and Hall, 2008; Simpson, 2004; Sin, 2010, 2014b).

4. Impacts and outcomes of volunteer tourism on volunteer tourists (see Alexander, 2012; Bailey and Russell, 2012; Broad, 2003; Coghlan and Gooch, 2011; Lepp, 2008; McGehee, 2002; McGehee and Santos, 2005; Zahra and McIntosh, 2007). For example, works have examined how or whether the experience of volunteering overseas has the potential and ability to change tourists' levels of participation in social movements and civic attitudes (see Bailey and Russell, 2010; McIntosh and Zahra, 2007; Zahra and McIntosh, 2007).

It is with such phenomenal growth in volunteer tourism in mind—in terms of both actual demand by tourists and supply by the tourism industry, as well as in terms of the academic interest that volunteer tourism has since attracted—that this special issue is put forward. Despite the rapid growth of academic research that focuses on volunteer tourism (publications referring specifically to volunteer tourism emerged from the 2000s, and notably in the last 10 years), we suggest in this special issue that works have so far placed too much emphasis on the empirical aspects of volunteer tourism, and instead, we need to begin to unpack how volunteer tourism as a social trend is part and parcel of, and contributes to our understanding of, broader social theories. Indeed, rather than continuing to see volunteer tourism as a niche sector alternative to mainstream tourism, we suggest that volunteer tourism has evolved to encompass such large numbers and interest, and that it is important to put forth fundamental questions about what volunteer tourism as a social and political phenomenon says about how we understand the world and our moral and ethical responsibilities in this world. In a way, the articles in this special issue, therefore, reflect similar concerns to the founding of this journal, *Tourist Studies*, where, like tourism, volunteer tourism "is now such a significant dimension to global social life that it can no longer be conceived of as merely what happens at self-styled tourist sites and encounters involving tourists away from home" (Franklin and Crang, 2001: 7).

This issue is made up of a selection of articles presented at a series of panels on "Traveling for a Cause: Critical Examinations of Volunteer Tourism and Social Justice" at the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting: Los Angeles, 2013. The articles theoretically and empirically examine the dynamic interplay between volunteer tourism and the broader expansion of market-mediated social justice campaigns. Also examined is the potential for volunteer tourism experiences to facilitate myriad implications for the volunteer tourists, volunteer tourism coordinators, and host community members. Positioned against larger transnational trends such as ethical consumerism in tourism, religious mission travel, work and study immersion programs, and academic fieldwork as "volunteer tourism," this issue examines the various implications of volunteer tourism and its supposed benefits to social, charitable, or environmental causes. As such, the articles in this issue provide a theoretically rich analysis of emerging critical research agendas at the intersection of volunteer tourism and social justice. In the remainder of this introduction, we first consider these agendas in greater detail, focusing on the theoretical themes of neoliberal development, governmentality, geographies of care and

responsibility, and the dilemmas found at the frequently encountered intersection of ethics and aesthetics. This theoretical discussion is then followed by a brief overview of the articles themselves.

To begin, the articles in this issue raise questions about the relationship between volunteer tourism and development. In particular, the authors examine development in the context of neoliberal economic and ideological practices. Tourism is increasingly identified in mainstream development policy and practice as promoting a particularly neoliberal economic and moral order (Mowforth and Munt, 2009; Phommavong, 2012). As development objectives such as income generation and capacity building are turned over to market and non-governmental actors, tourism has figured prominently as a key strategy option for localities throughout the Global South. The rise of volunteer tourism, then, reflects this trend in the "privatization" and the "NGOization" of development (Kapoor, 2013; Roy, 2012) in at least two ways. First, there has been a rapid expansion in the development field of opportunities for relatively well-off "volunteers" from the Global North to directly take part in development aid projects. Such opportunities were rare in earlier times when "development" was primarily the state's business and was conceived in more institutional and large-scale project terms. Second, to the extent that development has been depoliticized and rendered as a "challenge" for individuals and communities to tackle in their efforts to "overcome" poverty, volunteer tourism reflects the individualization of mainstream development practice. In this way, volunteer tourists have seemingly become ideal providers of development in ways that obscure the structures of global capitalism that perpetuate poverty and inequality. Griffith's article in this issue, for example, argues that volunteer tourism is positioned in Britain as a neoliberal project of active global citizenship in which doing work among the poor becomes a charitable way to build one's résumé.

Volunteer tourism can thus be productively viewed as a form of neoliberal governmentality, a kind of "technology of the self" through which subjects constitute themselves simultaneously as competitive, entrepreneurial, market-based, individualized actors *and* caring, responsible, active, global citizens. Of course, as much could be said for a broader conception of "responsible tourism," with responsibility viewed as a kind of "care for the self" involving self-cultivation and self-discipline. But there are also broader-scale implications to viewing volunteer tourism as neoliberal governmentality. As agents of neoliberalism, volunteer tourists also enact a kind of globalization of state space. In their discussion of "transnational governmentality," for example, Ferguson and Gupta (2002) noted how the combination of neoliberalism and globalization has complicated the spatialization of the state. While the state outsources to the private sector a greater share of welfare provision, that private sector is not spatially limited to the territory of the nation state itself. Government is increasingly being carried out not only by supranational organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) but also by "transnational alliances forged by activists and grassroots organizations and the proliferation of voluntary organizations supported by complex networks of international and transnational funding and personnel" (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002: 990). Volunteer tourism, then, can be productively viewed as a rising form of transnational governmentality in which tourists literally embody the new spaces and mobilities of global governance.

Whether or not tourists effectively perform their ascribed governing roles as agents of development is, of course, another matter entirely. As development work, volunteer tourism has clearly been found wanting. Thus, viewing volunteer tourism as a kind of transnational governmentality means emphasizing not only the deliberate calculations undertaken by both tourists and shapers of the tourist's experience to facilitate conduct toward particular norms but also the necessarily implied judgment and evaluation of such conduct according to those same norms. Volunteer tourists evaluate themselves and each other according to norms of selflessness and commitment (see Sinervo, this issue). This question of evaluation relative to (unstated and seemingly ambiguous but nevertheless assumed) norms of conduct is clearly central to the volunteer tourism experience. Indeed, a great deal of anxiety among tourists themselves, as well as critique among scholars and other critical observers of volunteer tourism, revolves around its apparent failure to live up to those norms or standards, whatever they may actually be.

This is not to say that pointing out the failings of volunteer tourists as neoliberal subjects is the only strand of critique developed in these articles. To the contrary, the articles tend to portray volunteer tourists as compassionate and intelligent—if not frustrated and overwhelmed—people whose actual experiences cannot be easily confined within either discourses of "development" or "neoliberalism." It is thus interesting to note how the articles echo a particular strand of critique of the "good intentions" of mainstream development actors and their projects (Li, 2007; Mitchell, 2002; Watts, 2003). As Ferguson (1994) demonstrated some time ago, the important question to ask is not so much why does development so often miss its targets, but rather what does development actually do? Similarly, while the objectives of volunteer tourism as a form of development aid are poorly served by the short-term presence, poor skills, and relative disorganization of tourists, it is perhaps less productive to simply criticize volunteer tourism for its failures as a kind of development tool than to explore its actual practices, effects, and outcomes and ask what is it that brings these about? Pushing their analyses in this direction, these articles demonstrate that "development" and even "neoliberalism" represent overly narrow and limited analytical frames within which to interpret volunteer tourism. Although "development aid" may remain, as Everingham argues in her article, a powerful discourse within which many tourists and institutional actors continue to think of volunteer tourism, the actual experiences and practices of volunteer tourists demand a broader and yet more nuanced set of evaluative tools.

The growing interest in geographies of care and responsibility suggests some insightful steps in this direction (Barnett et al., 2010; Lawson, 2007). Work on questions of care and responsibility in tourism have come about in response to a felt need on the part of scholars to better account for a broader range of experiences, labors, pleasures, and motivations among a whole range of actors involved in tourism (Ormond, 2013; Pearce et al., 2011; Sin, 2010). It has also stemmed from highly critical engagements with a much expanded repertoire of social issues swirling around the tourism experience. Much of this work focuses on rethinking "work" in terms of affect and emotion, what Veijola (2009) has called "hostessing." Another significant strand has focused on geographies of responsibility in tourism, with much of this literature engaging actively with a broader field of studies on ethical consumption, corporate social responsibility, fair trade, and sustainability. Geographers have remained particularly attuned to the place-specific

contexts in which practices of care and responsibility in tourism get played out, and how these contexts raise troubling and confounding questions about just what "being responsible" means in the first place.

"Responsibility" is a surprisingly ambiguous idea. While it carries with it obvious notions of accountability and obligation, these are necessarily context-dependent. Responsibility is, we might say, a place-based idea. This makes responsibility a navigational challenge for those—like tourists and other consumers in the global economy—who live their daily lives outside of the place-based contexts in which their responsibility is being articulated and enacted. And yet, "responsible consumption" or "responsible tourism" has taken on, as popular discourses, seemingly "universal" ethical connotations. That is, "being responsible" seems to signify a certain way of being, of conducting oneself in a particular way, a way marked by certain recognizable signs and reinforced by specific codes. Volunteer tourism, as these articles collectively suggest, is driven by assumed universal codes of responsibility, including eco or "green" consciousness, "giving back" to communities, and treating others as people rather than exotic objects. Yet in actual practice, as Sin (2010; 2014a) has demonstrated, being a volunteer tourist "in place" introduces situations in which acting responsibly may conflict with one's received world view and ethical keel.

This apparent tension between the messy world of place-based experience—where being a responsible volunteer tourist is difficult, frustrating, and fraught with setbacks, inefficiencies, and failures at the same time that it is rewarding and potentially life-changing—and a more abstract world of ideals, mediated representations, and knowledge production is a central problem that all of these articles confront to varying degrees. Scholars of volunteer tourism navigate the tricky terrain between accounting for experience, on one hand, and analyzing more abstract issues such as justice, inequality, neocolonialism, or development, on the other. How do we critique development or neoliberalism while not being dismissive of meaningful or affective experience? How do we link the personal and the social? Volunteer tourism offers a particularly productive opportunity to address these kinds of questions. For many scholars, the personal terrain upon which volunteering traffics erases the political from the equation: volunteer tourism becomes a kind of neoliberal "anti-politics machine" (Ferguson, 1994). Butcher (2013) has called responsibility a "stifling etiquette for anyone who wants to discuss real political and social choices." Yet as Griffiths argues in this issue, the personal, affective experience of volunteering can open up a whole world of immediate experience that makes the larger abstract issues impoverished by comparison.

In the end, the gap between these approaches represents an epistemological dilemma whose resolution is perhaps better left to philosophers. Yet, we would argue that volunteer tourism is a remarkably fertile field in which to push these analytical tensions forward. For example, volunteer tourism seems overlain with a set of normative judgments about pleasure. That is, travel purely for pleasure is often suspect as vaguely irresponsible. The volunteer tourist, we might say, seeks to inject the moral responsibilities of work into the leisure travel experience. And indeed, leisure and tourism have long been treated as "marginal" pursuits undertaken only after we have fulfilled our "responsibilities" (e.g. to our jobs, our families) (see Rojek, 2005). Almost by definition—according to this conventional approach—leisure travel might be viewed as irresponsible. Much of the

critical academic work on tourism fails to confront this implicit normative view of pleasure as suspect. Pleasure, unless it is the kind we get from, for example, building a school or helping the poor, is too often dismissed as a selfish, hedonistic pursuit. This tension mirrors a broader discomfort that social science scholars have long had with pleasure. Certainly, the "affect turn" has done much to address this, but ever since the Frankfurt School's critique of "mass culture" scholars have had difficulty accepting pleasure as a legitimate pursuit. As Marcus (1997) quipped in his critical review of theme park scholarship, the problem with Disney's critics is that they never go on any of the rides.

While volunteer tourism may itself be premised on a discomfort with pleasure and may be motivated by a discourse in which travel purely for leisurely pleasure is conceived as irresponsible, the study of actual volunteer tourism experiences reveals just how impossible it is to extract pleasure from the analysis. What is also being raised here is a question about reconciling aesthetics and ethics. "Ethical tourism" is clearly a highly aesthetic experience and is clearly not pleasure-free. How, then, are we to reconcile the ethical and the aesthetic, the responsible, and the pleasurable? Obviously, these should not be viewed as mutually exclusive terms, and yet scholarship often tends to treat them as such. Recently, Caton (2012) advocated a "moral turn" in tourism studies in which she argued that serious questions about morality in social science research have been stymied by both positivism and "postmodernism." Tourism, she argues, is a field ripe for addressing morality and responsibility precisely because its practices run the gamut of moral/responsible–immoral/irresponsible. Yet, we would add here two important additional steps that we feel are necessary if tourism studies are to complete Caton's "moral turn." Both of them are readily apparent in the study of volunteer tourism.

First, volunteer tourism—like tourism more broadly—must be approached in a "post-normative" analytical frame. Whether a "moral turn" can be post-normative at all remains, perhaps, to be seen. But the articles in this issue make a collective case for the need to move beyond a framework built around norms and standards of behavior, impact, and effect. Normative approaches to volunteer tourism tend to begin with a framework that evaluates such tourism according to a given set of objectives, typically finding that these objectives are either seldom reached or that volunteer tourism "negatively" impacts host communities. This has, in particular, been the case when looking at volunteering within the normative framework of development aid. Tourists themselves also tend to apply such normative approaches to their own evaluations of tourism ("is tourism good or bad?" "does tourism help or hurt local communities?"). Such normative evaluations of tourism often serve as motivations for volunteer tourism. We would argue that scholarship on volunteer tourism must move beyond such a framework if it is to fully come to terms with the complexities of the volunteer tourism experience in the terms of its actual practices, outcomes, and effects. With their ethnographic and highly place-specific explorations of affect, of the phenomenological, and of the contradictions and ambivalences of volunteer tourism, the articles in this issue all suggest such a move beyond normative approaches to evaluating the intersections of tourism, development, and neoliberalism more broadly.

Second, volunteer tourism, we feel, is best approached spatially, as a place-based phenomenon in which the contingencies and contexts of locality matter greatly. There are at least two dimensions of this spatiality that we would highlight here. One is the

inherent mobility of the volunteer tourist. Volunteer tourists—like tourists more generally—embody a whole range of socially constructed mobilities, thereby embodying the ways in which "the global" gets constituted through "the local." The mobility of volunteer tourists can thus serve as an important conceptual link between the abstract (i.e. "global structures and processes") and the embodied (i.e. "place-based experiences"). Another dimension of a spatial approach to volunteer tourism is to foreground the messiness and contingency of place. The articles collected in this issue challenge the notion that a "moral turn" in tourism is simply about the need to inject moral philosophy into the understanding and practice of tourism. Space, as David Harvey (2000) has famously observed, always disrupts what might otherwise be a straightforward theoretical proposition in the abstract: "… the insertion of space (let alone of tangible geographies) into *any* social theory (including that of Marx) is always deeply disruptive of its central propositions and derivations." Thus, we would argue that any "moral turn" in tourism, including volunteer tourism, must be premised on a spatial approach that is prepared to view questions of morality, responsibility, and ethics, as place-based and contingent.

This perhaps leaves us with a contradictory image of volunteer tourism. On one hand, we seem to have a form of tourism that can be characterized in particularly distinct ways (an emphasis on volunteering one's time to do work while "on holiday," a focus on care and responsibility for others while traveling, etc.). Yet, on the other hand, we find that the experiences of volunteer tourists are so varied and diffuse as to defy neat and tidy generalizations or abstract evaluations. Rather than trying to wrestle with the question of generalizing volunteer tourism's motivations or impacts in any normative sense, we find it more productive to treat volunteer tourism as a productive lens through which to raise broad theoretical and methodological questions about topics such as ethics, aesthetics, responsibility, pleasure, mobility, development, and neoliberalism, to name just a few. In our summaries of the articles that follow, we point to some of the ways we see each article moving in these directions.

The issue begins with "The Political Economy of Orphanage Tourism in Cambodia" (Guiney and Mostafanezhad). Drawing on Karl Polanyi's analytic of the "double movement," Guiney and Mostafanezhad try to make sense of orphanage tourism within the broader global political economy in which it operates. They examine the growth of orphanage tourism as well as the widespread critique of the industry by transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The authors illustrate how standard definitions of volunteer tourism fail to fully capture the range of experiences of the industry. Unique in its presentation of organized resistance against orphanage tourism, the article sheds light on some of the complexities, as well as resistance to volunteer tourism development. Bringing Polanyi's work into the analysis, Guiney and Mostafanezhad argue that this resistance can be understood in Polanyian terms, as a protective countermovement by anti-orphanage tourism campaigns that challenge the industry's morality and legitimacy. In this way, the article sheds light on the varied and sometimes contradictory ways that neoliberal economic policies and ideologies articulate with volunteer tourism in orphanages throughout Cambodia.

Sinervo shifts our focus to the volunteer coordinators who manage Spanish language schools. In "Brokering Aid through Tourism: The Contradictory Roles of Volunteer Coordinators in Cusco, Peru," she addresses the integration of cultural and linguistic

immersion with humanitarian and touristic experiences. Blurring the boundaries between the tourist and the ex-patriot, she addresses the common experience of "volunteer tourists-cum-volunteer tourism managers." Sinervo documents this increasingly prevalent positionality within volunteer tourism with ethnographic precision. She argues that as emerging players in the larger aid industry in Cusco, volunteer tourism managers' positionality as neither fully volunteer nor entirely tourist forces them to "tack" between multiple roles and responsibilities to both local people and international volunteer tourists.

Continuing the focus on volunteer tourism as a development strategy, Everingham examines the industry within a post-development framework in "Intercultural exchange and mutuality in volunteer tourism: The case of Intercambio in Ecuador." Situating her case study within theories of neocolonialism and development, she argues that volunteer tourism is primarily understood within modernist discourses of development that limit analysis of the industry as exclusively positive or negative. Her focus on the varied aspects of the volunteer tourism experience from the perspective of volunteer tourists as well as the range of volunteer tourism organizations forces us to reconsider binary generalizations that are often all too easily used to analyze the industry. From a post-development theoretical perspective, Everingham argues that in volunteer tourism, the concept of development needs to be extended to include a range of experiences such as creativity and intercultural communication—often key aspects of the volunteer tourism experience. In this way, the volunteer tourism, she argues, can operate from outside modernist discourses of development and better contribute to the social justice agendas that its participants often seek to address.

Miller and Mair further illustrate the varied experiences of volunteer tourism through their analysis of organic farm volunteering in Argentina in "Organic Farm Volunteering as a Decommodified Tourist Experience." Using World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) as a case study, Miller and Mair examine the intersection of volunteer tourism with farm volunteering. It is at this intersection that they identify key issues that volunteer tourism faces in realizing the oft-stated goals of consciousness raising around environmental and social justice issues. Their article helps illustrates the complex relationship between discourse and practice in the volunteer tourism experience.

Finally, Griffiths articulates new kinds of engagements with neoliberalism in volunteer tourism in the Global South. In "I've got goose bumps just talking about it!: The affective life on neoliberalized volunteering programmes," he addresses what he calls the "neoliberalizing processes" of volunteer tourism in India. Griffiths pays particular attention to the experience of neoliberal affect and argues that space to transcend the cultural logic of neoliberalism through emotional and intimate experiences with one's volunteer community or cause is an often overlooked aspect of volunteer tourism. Drawing on the British government's International Citizen Service program, Griffiths argues that while the program in many ways follows suite with other neoliberal volunteer organizations, neoliberalism is not the only, or even the primary, reference from which to make sense of the affective, and embodied experience of volunteering abroad. In what he refers to as "affective data," Griffiths makes the point that even within the neoliberal climate of volunteer tourism, emotional, affective, and humanistic experience is made possible.

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