



Who are you  
and why  
are you here?

A critical take on  
adolescent voluntourism  
by a former adolescent  
voluntourist.



My name is Melissa & I'm here to tell you that **YOU GOT DUPED.**

I know that you did because I did too, & have since done a lot of critical self-reflection.

In high school I was a mixed-race 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Filipinx immigrant to "Vancouver", who wore my heart on my sleeve & didn't back down from being a Social Justice Warrior (& I still am).

I got involved with humanitarianism & voluntourism through my Global Initiatives class & heavy indoctrination from We Day.

At first (& for a long time) these trips to build a house/school/clinic in Mexico/the Dominican Republic (DR)/Haiti seemed like a good way to "make a difference."

One day while I was interning (read: paying to labour) for Live Different in the DR, this random white couple from the resort we were staying at followed us to "tour" our build site. We were told to ignore them, but man, was I pissed.

I didn't realize this until years later, but that white couple made me stare myself in the face. Sure,

o o I had a shovel in my hand, but really, what was the difference between me and them? We were all Westerners on holiday, there to remind ourselves about how "good" we had it by consuming the spectacle of the impoverished racial other.



me as an interx

A study by ~~Han~~ Han (2019) et al. lists the following as motivating factors for voluntourism:

personal development

education (for school)

ego enhancement

escapism

altruistic community concern

→ the only factor about "helping"

all of these are self-serving

Is this enough? NO. Let's interrogate the helping imperative using responses to Biddle's "Why I Stopped Being a Voluntourist". None of these teenagers consider the perspective of those "in need", and even when faced with a justified critique, they still make it about the voluntourist. The helping imperative reinforces stereotypes

that people in the "Global South" are in need of saving by Westerners, & is used to the ends of reflecting well on voluntourists.\*

candy March 12, 2014 · 1:03 pm

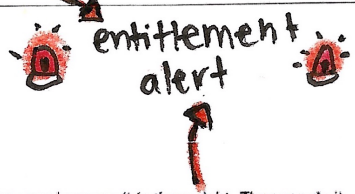
I think it is a good thing because it is good to be exposed to new culture and new things. I think that students need to help.

patrick March 12, 2014 · 1:01 pm

I don't think it is wrong. I don't know why it would be wrong for someone to go to another less fortunate country to help them out. I think it is a very good thing for some kids to take their time to go to a less fortunate country to try and make things better.

Nick March 12, 2014 · 1:06 am

If a teenager wants to participate in Voluntourism then they can in my opinion. In fact why would it be wrong?



felipe March 12, 2014 · 1:02 pm

Well think that if they want to do it they can because it is there right. They can do it because they are helping others and the essay that the women wrote is helpful because it would encourage others. Do what they can because others will help.

Rezaul 3A March 12, 2014 · 1:40 pm

No, is teenage volunteerism are very helpful for people. Some people are going to another part of the world, but they don't know which place better. If anybody going before they know everything any country. So I think so volunteerism is very important for most of illiterate people. They don't know actually how to read. Finally I can say it's very good decision people take a volunteerism

enforcing the stereotype that impoverished people are lacking education & require guidance from a white saviour.  
**[ADOLESCENTS ARE CAPABLE OF UPHOLDING THE WEST'S COLONIAL POWER.]**

# The **PROBLEMATIC DISCOURSE OF LUCK**

was around every corner when I was volunteering. "Luck" & "fortune" are very simplistic ways to erase colonial/imperial forces that **IMPOVERISH** countries in the "Global South". On my trips we would talk about the "birth lottery", which doesn't challenge the fact that these people **HAVE BEEN MADE POOR**. It becomes normal, taken-for-granted.

In fact, on my "hero holiday" trips, we were specifically told not to be mad about the way things are, to not stir the pot back in Canada, & accept the state of things to absolve us of guilt.

**"COMPLEX AND HISTORICALLY-SIGNIFICANT GLOBAL RELATIONS" PROBLEMS**



**REQUIRE "COMPLEX AND HISTORICALLY-SIGNIFICANT GLOBAL RELATIONS" SOLUTIONS**

(Not high schoolers who want a fun spring break.)



Could it be that as a teenager growing up in the suburbs, who so desperately wanted to "be good" & make the world a better place, yet felt little to no control over anything, that when an opportunity to build a house/clinic in Mexico the DR with my friends came up, I took it without considering the wider ramifications of globally privileged people using the globally disenfranchised to feel "a greater degree of power & autonomy while abroad", or to "prove [my] own independence", thus reinforcing global inequality?

... That's exactly what happened.

I know you mean well. I know you're upset about global injustices.

But that does NOT give you the right to go on vacation (trust me, it's a vacation) to a systemically disadvantaged country, build something, take a bunch of pictures with random kids so you can feel better about yourself.

### Further Reading:

- Wainaina. "The Power of Love"
- Khan. "The South Matters - for The South" \* Tiessen (2012)

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