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Who Are You and Why Are You Here?: Critical Reflection

As a teenager, I knew how "lucky" I was to be in my subject position, especially given that my mother had grown up in conditions that non-governmental organizations (NGO's) would describe as a "humanitarian crisis". It felt natural to go on spring break volunteer tourism, or "voluntourism", trips with my Global Initiatives class; in fact, I felt a sense of moral superiority to other kids who didn't go abroad to help the "less fortunate". At least twenty other kids from my high school went on each of these trips too. I am not sure how many of them have continued on to read post-colonial or post-development literature, but I have a suspicion that in the seven years since we graduated, they have done some self-reflection and now these experiences don't sit so well with them. *Who Are You and Why Are You Here?* is for me, for my Global Initiatives classes (and other former high school humanitarians), and for current adolescents who are considering doing humanitarian work. There is much to be said about adolescent humanitarianism, and the aid industry more broadly, that I do not even touch in this zine. But for now, I will use my subject position to argue that through voluntourism, adolescents are capable of upholding the West's colonial power.

The first part of my zine hails my readership to identify with me in a parody of my former position as a humanitarian informant – someone who has the privileged position to witness global poverty (but not experience it), and whose word as a Canadian (and especially a girl whose family are immigrants) can be trusted based on global ideas about international relations. The title *Who Are You and Why Are You Here?* is a reference to that question that voluntourists should be familiar with; it is often asked in a circle discussion on the first evening of a humanitarian trip. This question asks voluntourists to acknowledge their status as Westerners and position the host country as in need of their help, thus justifying their presence there. Even if some readers are unfamiliar with this question, I present myself through personal anecdotes and testimonies, and use imagery and aesthetics so that my audience finds me relatable. These narrative strategies fit within the genre of humanitarian life narratives, particularly the memoir-festo, but to a different end than most (Jefferess, "2V2"). My goal with this zine is to manifest the humanitarian informant in a way that informs my readers about the problems with humanitarianism, rather than affirm the power of the aid industry. When I was an unpaid intern for Live Different in 2014 (actually, I paid to be an intern), I used my subjectivity as a charismatic, female humanitarian informant in a video I made as part of my internship (Plisic). The video was used as "cultural education" material for the volunteers who would be building houses, and it completely erases the ways in which Haiti and the Dominican Republic have been, and continue to be, colonized and caught up in imperial globalization. The main sources I consulted were likely Wikipedia, Travel Advisor and NGO websites – this is why it is so important that I include non-Western writers in my suggestions for further reading. On a personal/ moral level, *Who Are You and Why Are You Here* functions as an outlet for me to grapple with and right some of the damage that I did as a Westerner. As I move towards

affiliating myself with the "random white couple" for self-critique, I bring my readers with me via their identification with me. Teenagers can be quite stubborn and self-righteous (I speak from experience), so it is important for me to situate myself and open up in the way that I do to avoid being met with defensive reactions. By getting my readers to affiliate with me from the outset of my zine, when I critique my own actions and experiences it opens the avenue for them to do the same for themselves.

After introducing myself and my stance to my readers, I move towards the more analytical substance of *Who Are You and Why Are You Here?*. On the second spread I bring together Han et al., Teissen, and comments on Schulten's article to support my argument that adolescents are not innocent in global affairs. Han et al.'s article provides the empirical foundation for the argument, Tiessen's arguments about "the helping imperative" provide context for that data (3), and the comments from Schulten's article (which asks teenage readers to respond to Biddle's essay) exemplify the problematics of youth voluntourism. "The helping imperative", which is "a narrative employed widely to reflect a desire to save the world but only in so far as it reflects well on those who wish to 'do good'" is akin to the sentiments that Wainaina satirizes in "The Power of Love" (Tiessen 3). While this spread is informed by Wainaina's critiques of "compassionate" humanitarians, I do not directly quote him, as the tone of his critique begs more context than what I could have provided. I do, however, include him in the list of further readings at the end of my zine; his is an important text, and perhaps one that may be more approachable after reading this. I hope that putting these comments in this context lays bare the problem of teenage and Western entitlement and their relationships to the colonial development project.

My third spread is informed by Fassin, Warah, and once again Wainaina. It disturbs me that the "problematic discourse of luck" was so ubiquitous while abroad. On each of my Live Different trips, we devoted an evening discussion to "the birth lottery"; we were told that we had "won" by being born in Canada, leaving the locals as "losers" (and erasing inequality and oppression in Canada). This fits Fassin's discussion of "global scenes of misfortune", which I have explained in an accessible way for my readership (508; Jefferess "1V1"). Warah, like Wainaina, does not make a direct appearance in this text; however, this spread is informed by her post-development arguments that humanitarian aid is more detrimental than it is beneficial (6). To appeal to my readers, I use a "modern problems require modern solutions" meme as comedic relief, preceding a direct call-out. Again, I make myself palatable before shifting to a self-critique that functions more broadly as well; by making it about me, I avoid finger-pointing politics that would otherwise turn a reader (especially a teenager) off from my argumentation. The run-on sentence on my second page is the question-answer to my guiding question, "How did my experiences growing up in North Vancouver usher me towards humanitarianism?". It is hard to look at the mistakes that you have made, especially as an adolescent who just wants to "be good", so I hope that this reflection is meaningful for my readers.

To conclude *Who Are You and Why Are You Here?* I directly address my audience. These are words that I want to tell 15-year-old Melissa, and all my friends who went to Mexico or the Dominican Republic with me. I admit that the second paragraph is somewhat harsh, but it is nothing compared to the harm that is done by these field trips. For further reading I recommend Wainaina (as mentioned) and Khan – two non-Western scholars who my readers may not have encountered, but whose wisdom is invaluable and accessible. *Who Are You and Why Are You*

Here? is but a starting point for more discussions about complicity in global inequality, Western entitlement, and realizing that what you did was not all it was chalked up to be.

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