

## The “Me to We” social enterprise: Global education as lifestyle brand

**David Jefferess**

**University of British Columbia, Okanagan campus, Canada**

“Me to We” is a North American-based “social enterprise” established by Craig and Marc Kielburger to provide sustainable funding for the non-profit agency Free the Children (FTC); Me to We donates 50% of its profits towards FTC’s administrative costs (Me to We 2011a). The three primary “products” of the enterprise are: volunteer trips; motivational speakers; and, a line of ethically manufactured organic clothing and accessories, marketed as “Me to We Style.” In addition, each year the organization gathers thousands of youth in sports arenas for “We Day” events, featuring the Kielburgers, motivational speakers, and celebrities. These events are webcast to classrooms and re-presented in a television special. As a “new kind of social enterprise” (Me to We 2011b), “Me to We” “transforms consumers into world changers, one transaction at a time” (Me to We 2011a); it promotes a way of being good in the world as a consumer identity: “Every trip, t-shirt, song, book, speech, thought and choice adds up to a fun, dynamic lifestyle that’s part of the worldwide movement of *we*,” (Me to We, 2011b). The business model for the enterprise, the consumer is assured, “measures the bottom line, not by dollars earned, but by number [sic] of lives we change and the positive social and environmental impact we make” (Me to We, 2011a). Such a model has significant implications for both humanitarianism and global education.

Humanitarian NGOs are increasingly faced with significant competition for government funding and private donations; as a result, organizations need to distinguish themselves in order to receive popular exposure, which is necessary for successful fundraising (Cottle & Nolan, 2007, p. 865). The Kielburgers have set their organisations apart among Canadian NGOs by producing their humanitarian project as a distinctive youth-oriented brand. “Me to We” utilizes a diverse variety of marketing approaches, from the live performances of We Day and motivational talks in schools, to social media and television shows, to curriculum material. Not only has it attracted media attention, it has developed partnerships to provide media content, including the annual We Day special on the CTV television network and regular columns by the Kielburgers in Canadian newspapers. Further, this for-profit enterprise has firmly embedded itself within the education system. The Schools in Action program provides a structure of events that highlight development issues, to some degree, but primarily articulate the “Me to We” lifestyle brand.

Lilie Chouliaraki (2010) contends that in addition to emotion-oriented styles of appeal (i.e. pity, guilt, and empathy), humanitarian discourse increasingly relies upon modes of branding. This mode of humanitarianism produces “an implicit investment in the identity of the humanitarian agency itself... it is not the verbalization of an argument but the ‘aura’ of the brand that sustains the relationship between the product and consumer” (p. 118). The “Me to We” “philosophy” relies greatly on emotion – gratitude, empathy, and happiness – but unlike the agencies that Chouliaraki analyzes, “Me to We” reframes humanitarianism and global citizenship education in the terms of the self-help industry. The 2010 catch phrase for We Day, “shameless idealists,” appeals to a desire for (post)consumer feelings of fulfilment and distinction.

The philosophy of moving from “Me” to “We” appears to articulate an inclusive and transnational politics of belonging and connection, but the brand is marketed to the youth consumer as a

means of accruing “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1977). In this case, rather than collecting material goods as a means of “attesting the taste and distinction of their owner” (p. 197), “Me to We” is constructed as a way of achieving social distinction through being “good”. The Kielburgers characterize “Me to We” as a social movement that “will take shape as a growing wave of kindness, compassion, and caring” (2006, p. 254). Unlike the social movements from which they claim to draw inspiration – South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement and the United States’ civil rights movement, in particular – they explain that “Me to We” is “a quiet, personal movement that spreads as ordinary people begin to embrace a new understanding of themselves and their relationship with the rest of the world” (ibid. p. 254). This focus on personal transformation produces a collectivity of individual consumers who are to understand their relationship to the rest of the world only in the terms of moral obligation. In *Me to We: Finding Meaning in a Material World* (2006), the Kielburgers present the “Me to We” philosophy as a means of redressing the “gap between our society’s soaring monetary wealth and the true wealth of happiness and well-being that all of us deserve to enjoy” (p. 37). As a result, this “we” is not constituted in terms of the recognition of global social, economic and political relationships, but as a personal ethic of goodwill towards others. “Me to We” appeals to North American youth to seek fulfilment in actions informed by empathy and compassion, but it promises distinction through the affiliation with the brand and its celebrity spokespeople. This social enterprise model provides a specifically neoliberal formulation of the practice of philanthropy in that it relies upon corporate-consumer affiliation and, despite the appeal to the collective, the autonomous individual subject who is distinguished by their desire to transcend affluence without giving it up.

I provide a critique of the “Me to We” social enterprise as a manifestation of benevolence, or the demand to *be good* (Jefferess, 2008), as imbricated in the consumer happiness industry, and as reliant upon a humanitarian celebrity culture that echoes the colonial white man’s burden. Because the Me to We philosophy provides the framework for global citizenship education in many Canadian schools, analysis of “Me to We” helps us to think about how pedagogies of global citizenship are indebted to colonial frameworks of identity and difference, as well as neoliberal social and economic ideology. In previous presentations of these arguments, I have been cautioned by teachers that such criticism will silence discourse on global issues and give license to educators to “do nothing.” My purpose in providing such a critique – as a practice of critical literacy – is to foster a critically self-reflexive engagement with how the cultural politics of humanitarianism have become a means of providing consumer fulfilment. The dominance of the “Me to We” phenomenon, I suggest, impedes social action by foreclosing the possibility of recognizing how “we” are implicated in the structures that produce suffering and inequality (aka global “poverty”). Further, it prevents us from recognizing how we might connect ourselves to the ideals and strategies of social movements around the world that seek not aid but the transformation of these structures of inequality and the worldviews that normalize them.

## **The Promise of Fulfilment through Benevolent Action**

### *The Ethical Formulation of “We”*

At the age of twelve, Craig Kielburger came to national prominence in Canada after he travelled to Pakistan to visit child labourers, challenged the Canadian Prime Minister to stop child labour, and created Free the Children. Initially, FTC focused on raising awareness of the exploitation of children and framed its mandate in terms of child rights discourse (Jefferess, 2002). Currently, FTC functions within a development model. Through the “Adopt a Village” program, for instance, FTC seeks to “lift communities from poverty” through projects that foster alternative income streams, education, health care, and water and sanitation (Free the Children, 2011a). In

contrast, “Me to We” functions more ambivalently. While much of the work of “Me to We” seems to focus on issues of humanitarianism (i.e. fundraising for disaster relief in Haiti and other FTC projects), it is marketed as a “philosophy” and functions more within the realm of the North American self-help industry; it targets youth with the promise of “finding meaning in a material world,” as *Me to We* (2006), is sub-titled.

To the degree that Me to We works within the humanitarian framework, it relies upon common tropes of development discourse that simplify global relations of power. For instance, the Other in need is produced as an object of pity, and social inequalities are represented as reflecting a dichotomy of the fortunate and the unfortunate. In a 2009 lecture in Kelowna, Canada, for instance, Craig presented to an audience of Canadian elementary and high school students images aimed at depicting the stark contrast between the material experiences of North Americans and Africans: night-time satellite images of North America show the land mass as radiant in electric light while Africa remains in darkness. Such images reproduce the stereotype of “darkest” Africa and frame the social problem of poverty as how the Other *lacks*. Craig explained that poverty is caused by local governments that are not sustainable and by population growth, which strains resources and fosters violent competition. The reason poverty persists in Africa, he claims, is because Canada has not provided sufficient or effective development aid. While the Kielburgers acknowledge that “racism still exists, colonialism has given way to neocolonialism, and inequality is still rampant” (2006, p. 192), and in the speech Craig does acknowledge the problems of tied aid and debt, their proposed solution reaffirms the role of North Americans to provide more and better aid, rather than challenge neo-colonial relationships that (re)produce poverty. Kielburger characterizes Canadians as “some of the luckiest people in the world” (2009). As global citizens, he asserts, Canadians need to “recognize what we have to share in this world” (2009): “As we learn to feel gratitude and act on our good feelings through reaching out to others, we begin to live the “Me to We” philosophy” (Kielburger & Kielburger 2006, p. 146). The solution to the problem of poverty is presented in terms of benevolent obligation: What can we, the fortunate, do to help the unfortunate?

Such formulations of global inequality and “our” place in the world, which are repeated in the various ways that “Me to We” presents its philosophy, avoid the complexity of global relations and ignore the possibility that we might be complicit in structures of inequality. Craig’s anecdote of responding to indigenous rights activists in Colombia reveals the narrow formulation of the “we” philosophy. Asked by these activists whether there is racism and struggles for indigenous rights in Canada; Craig declares:

On that one I just shook my head and said, unfortunately, absolutely, there are still situations plaguing certain communities disproportionately; particularly issues around violence, issues of lack of government support, issues around poverty, substance abuse, children not finishing post-secondary, or secondary, education. (Kielburger 2009).

In his response, Kielburger does not use the first person pronoun “we”. He does not acknowledge that the “issues” he identifies might be the consequences of institutions and policies, such as the dislocation of indigenous peoples on to reserves, the Indian Act, and the Indian residential school system. Further, his reply elides any possibility that we (non-indigenous people in Canada) are responsible for these policies and programs and continue to benefit from them. There is no acting subject causing the harm he identifies: the “we” disappears. Instead, those who experience harm are produced as subjects of pity, to be helped. Implicitly, “we” are distinct from them and our relation is defined only by our act of aid. The “we” in “Me to We’s” marketing is reserved to articulations of moral obligation. The problem is

defined as *their* lack, and, more importantly, that in a world of plenty we remain unfulfilled; we can achieve happiness, however, by helping Others.

This solely ethical formulation of the pronoun “we” is reaffirmed over and over again within Me to We’s marketing, including in the repeated testimonials of celebrities and CEOs at the We Day event. These highly privileged members of Canadian society testify to how their lives were transformed by witnessing the suffering of Others, the projects of FTC, and the joy of giving children “hope and dreams” (We Day, 2011). Chouliaraki argues that acts of humanitarian action, such as these testimonials of “making a difference”, function as an affective regime with a moralizing function that is “established through ways in which the imagery of suffering provides subtle evidence of the sufferer’s gratitude for the (imagined) alleviation of her suffering by a benefactor and the benefactor’s respective empathy towards the grateful sufferer” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112). In the testimonials of transformation, the ideal of “making a difference” provides a means of *being*: good, happy, fulfilled. Theories of happiness, in a Western context, often suggest that happiness allows one to be less self-centred and that happy people tend to be more altruistic (Ahmed 2010, p. 9). In *Me to We* and the testimony of the speakers at “We Day”, benevolent action is marketed as the source of fulfilment; people make the sacrifice of giving to others not because they are compelled to or because they feel guilty, but because it gives them pleasure (Kielburger & Kielburger 2006, p. 32). As Craig and Marc write, “whenever we look at the pictures of the people we’ve helped, we remember our time with them, and the happiness the moment brought comes flooding back.... Even years later, we can’t help smiling” (Ibid., p.184). The “helped” provide a means of transformation and happiness for the “helper”.

Robin Wiszowaty, the FTC program director in Kenya, recites the narrative of her transformation annually at the “We Day” events, and in her tours as a motivational speaker for “Me to We”. She describes how as a young (white) woman from the United States she travelled to Kenya where she was “adopted” by a Maasai family. She celebrates the generosity and sense of community of her hosts, but also outlines the various ways in which they “lack” (in education, healthcare) as well the gendered forms of oppression in Maasai society. But this is the extent of her representation of the community. Wiszowaty’s tale focuses on herself. She describes how she was a frustrated “average kid”; there was more to life than her middle-class world, and no one understood her. By living with a Maasai family – experiencing their generosity and sense of community as well as their poverty and sexism – she realized: “I could do something. I found myself in this mud home in Africa. I decided for myself what my priorities, my ethics, and my values, truly were ” (Wiszowaty, 2009). She explains that as a representative of “Me to We” she seeks to instil in youth the belief that “they can do anything with their life. That they don’t need to fit into a box but they can explore- and any passion that they have they can follow through on it, because youth can make a difference in this world” (Wiszowaty, 2009).

Me to We, then, functions much more within the growing North American happiness industry than solely within the framework of humanitarianism. The “Me to We” philosophy, the Kielburger’s explain, redefines happiness as a “happiness of the soul” (2006, p. 183), which is really a classical ideal wherein happiness constitutes living a meaningful and virtuous life (Ahmed, 2010, p. 12). The Kielburgers seek to challenge the pre-eminence of hedonistic happiness (2006, p. 183), but the problem they identify is not materialism, per se, but the lack of personal fulfilment in pursuing material pleasures. As Sara Ahmed argues in her critique of the “duty of happiness”, we must be mindful of how these demands for happiness and fulfilment are bound up in the cultural politics of privilege (2010, p. 11). By lamenting what they call the “rich-but-poor phenomenon,” the Kielburgers present the materially privileged as having an obligation to be happy, which, ostensibly can (only) be achieved through philanthropy, and more

specifically by affiliation with “Me to We” (2006, p. 44). The Kielburger’s council that “happiness comes not so much from achieving your goals as from having the right ones” (ibid, p.188) which further positions “Me to We” not just in the terms of humanitarian ethics but in the terms of the acquisition of symbolic capital, or distinction. The products and logo of “Me to We” function as a brand, signifying a specific lifestyle and attitude (Klein, 2000). Like other individualized discourses of therapy and moral progression, the sort of change that the “Me to We” style promises is centred on the personal and the self rather than systems or structures.

### *The Kenya Experience*

For instance, the “Kenya experience” becomes one of the primary signifiers of the “Me to We” brand, as it functions as the site of transformation for the benefactor; it is where the privileged North American traveller can have what the Kielburgers describe as a “moment of truth” (Kielburger & Kielburger 2006, p.122). “Me to We” “volunteer trips” are marketed as both learning and adventure for the traveller, allowing people to “step into a new world”: “See fascinating places, become immersed in new cultures and truly see the world. Volunteer alongside local communities, develop friendships and support community development” (Me to We, 2011c). In its brochure, “Volunteer Adventures at Bogani Cottages, Kenya” (Me to We, n.d.), which was provided to the more than 15 000 youth attendees of the 2010 We Day event in Vancouver, Craig and Marc invite individuals, families, schools, and corporations to travel with Me to We; the trips provide an “intimate and unique learning experience against the backdrop of the African landscape. All the while, you’ll enjoy the comforts of home at our Bogani Cottages and tented camp. Come with us and feel the real heartbeat of Kenya as you meet the people, see the animals and live the lifestyle” (Ibid). The all-inclusive trips ensure the compassionate consumer “luxurious” accommodation and healthy meals made from organic ingredients prepared by “our five-star chef” after “a hard day’s work of volunteering.” A typical trip includes five days at the cottages learning about Maasai culture and working with a FTC project in a nearby community followed by three days on safari or at a beach resort.

While not all Me to We organized school-based trips to Kenya are as luxurious as the brochure advertises, these trips nonetheless privilege a particular subject (the traveller/helper) and form of action. The brochure assures travellers that by building a new school, planting trees in a community garden, or painting classrooms, they are helping to “break the cycle of poverty”. As 10 year old Taite Jorgensen’s testimonial attests, however, the adventure promises personal fulfilment: “Kenya was an amazing place to go with Free the Children. Laughing and playing with all the friendly African kids while building their school didn’t just make them happy, it made me feel good on the inside too. Free the Children is SUCH an amazing group” (Ibid.). The emergence of humanitarian tourism has provided a model of ethical travel that promises the enrichment of the traveller. The visitor learns about other cultures and experiences of life, provides “help” through tangible projects like building health centres, and gains valuable perspective on their own lives (Simpson, 2005; Guttentag, 2009; Herrmann 2011). I do not want to simply dismiss the merits of such experiences for the traveller; yet, as critics increasingly point out, “voluntourism” – as educational service learning or as ethical travel – constitutes a new form of colonial paternalism and often harms the host communities: volunteers are typically untrained and often not competent in the labour they perform (Guttentag, 2009); projects can fuel conflict among and within communities (Doer, 2011); projects focus on the symptoms of poverty rather than its causes (Ibid); volunteers often take the place of local labour; projects often reinforce neoliberal policies that weaken governments and allow foreign donors to determine social policy; and in some cases, children become overtly commodified in order to provide tourists an “orphanage” experience (Birrell, 2010; Human, 2010).

Just as importantly, ‘voluntourism’ reinforces, and is an example of, a consumer-capitalist culture that focuses on the needs and interests of the most privileged. For instance, of the 21 photographs in the brochure (*Me to We*, n.d.), 10 centre the presence of white tourists, including a full page image of an adult white hand held by the hand of an African child, a white family posed with two local school girls, adult white males performing carpentry, and a white woman providing health care to an African child. Five of the photos depict wildlife and landscapes, three present the accommodations, and just three depict Kenyans without the presence of white helpers. Similarly, the rhetoric of the brochure reinforces a colonial politics of difference rather than a cosmopolitan ethic of connection. In her analysis of such humanitarian “reality tours” Gada Mahrouse concludes that the tourist gains a reinforced sense of good fortune compared to the Other, gratitude for the ability to consume, and a transformational experience that nonetheless reinforces their own comfort, both materially, and in the sense of their own innocence, redemption, and benevolence (2010, p. 181). The assurance that visitors will enjoy all the “comforts of home” is made at least four times in the brochure. Here, “home” is understood to be the visitor’s home rather than a home in the community they are visiting; as a result, the experience normalizes middle-class North American aspirations for material comfort. The promise of “living the lifestyle” refers not to an inter-cultural educational experience but to the acquisition of “Me to We” style. The “experience” “Me to We” markets promises reinforcement of the self – as good and compassionate – rather than the potential conflict, anxiety, or discomfort that transformation often entails.

In the travel brochures for “Me to We” trips, the testimonials of personal transformation through Me to We and FTC, and the Kielburgers’ writing, the Maasai are presented as culturally rich, but their “poverty” is never historicized or contextualized in any detailed way. In *Me to We*, the Kielburger’s note that “of all Africa’s people, the colourful Maasai are among the best known to Westerners” but “much of their land has been taken for private ranches and reserves, forcing many to eke out a living through subsistence farming” (2006, p. 54). This statement acknowledges what David Harvey describes as the history of “accumulation by dispossession” that continues to provide the foundation for economic neoliberalism (2006, p.153). However, because the “Maasai” function within the Me to We “philosophy” as the vehicle for the promise of happiness, the details of this ongoing history of dispossession cannot be included in the narrative. The Kielburgers do not explain how the Anglo-Maasai Agreements of 1904 and 1911 ceded Maasai territory in the Central Rift Valley to white settlers and confined the Maasai people on two reserves, altering their ways of life and producing their impoverishment, a relation that has been maintained and reinforced by the Kenyan state and foreign resource companies, supported by the World Bank (Kantai, 2008). As a result, Me to We marketing naturalizes poverty and, significantly, ignores the fact that Maasai social movements are actively struggling for redress and compensation, not development aid (Kantai 2008; *The End of Poverty* 2009). As Binyavanga Wainaina writes, “nobody, really, has seen how the Maasai have become wealthy or even healthy out of all the thousands and thousands of Projects. But the Maasai, they can be certain that they are loved” (2008, p. 91). The celebrity testimonials of FTC work in Kenya are not geared towards notions of redress or justice for the ongoing violence being perpetrated against the Maasai but how the North American visitor finds fulfilment by loving the suffering people of Kenya.

### *Benevolent Action*

Hence, the forms of action that Me to We promotes focus on achieving a sense of self as benevolent. For instance, at the end of each chapter in *Me to We*, Craig and Marc provide suggestions for “Living Me to We”. Of the 39 suggestions for action, nine are acts of kindness, such as thanking people, secretly giving loved ones notes, or surprising the people at the local

fire station with homemade baking. Eight suggestions focus on a personal ecological ethics, such as buying local products or using reusable mugs. The other suggestions focus on becoming more aware (i.e. finding on a map where clothes are made), fundraising for or donating to charities, doing things to develop family bonds, volunteering, or expressing Me to We style and promoting FTC. Similarly the second half of chapter twelve is devoted to actions that can make a better world, and again focuses on fundraising, volunteering, or developing friendships and family bonds. Unlike social movements, in which participants often undertake great risk, the actions that signify “Me to We” style require no sacrifice of the privileges that make these actions possible.

As a project geared toward youth, and with the active collaboration of the formal school system in Canada, “Me to We” serves to shape what constitutes “making a difference”. The 2011/12 Social Action Calendar outlines a series of initiatives beginning with a food drive at Halloween, a “vow of silence” event November 30, a focus on Aboriginal education, and a week-long Freedom Fest in April, that focuses on fundraising (We Schools, 2011). These forms of action, which rely upon the fortunate/unfortunate dichotomy and posit the solution to poverty as (only) compassion and charity, provide a stark contrast to forms of awareness-raising that focus on recognizing the inequalities of the international division of labour. As Bruce Robbins argues through the concept of the “sweatshop sublime,” the realization of the “inconceivable magnitude and interdependence” of the world economic system (2002, p. 85), for the Western positioned subject (of affluence), requires the recognition of one’s complicity in a structure that produces inequality; rather than fortune, one must recognize how they are a beneficiary of a system. At the same time that such insights seem only to reveal our powerlessness to effect change, “this limited moment of ethically inspired consumer consciousness is just the sort of raw or semi-processed phenomenological material in which private and public, domestic and international are fused, and it is out of such material that an internationalist anti-globalization politics on a mass scale will have to emerge” (ibid, p. 86).

Me to We’s concern with providing a line of ethically-produced clothing and general overtures towards ecological ethics would seem consistent with such a politics, yet as the list of corporate sponsors for “We Day” reveals, there is a disconnect between the idea of “being ethical” and the social structures within which we perform as actors. For instance, Cadbury, the chocolate manufacturer with close ties to British colonialism (Du Bois 302), sources its cocoa from Ghana (Cadbury, n.d.), but it had just one product in Canada in 2010 that was certified as fair trade. While there has been some controversy about the use of child labour on Fair Trade certified farms in Ghana (Bradburn, 2010), a number of books, films, and human rights organizations document the prevalence of forced labour, violence, and suffering in west African cocoa farming (Bradburn, 2010, Off 2007, Global Exchange). Similarly, Nature’s Path Organic, another sponsor, emphasizes its ecological values, but the company does not use certified fair trade ingredients and provides information only on the Canadian farmers it purchases from, and not farmers and workers outside of North America (Nature’s Path, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). When we trace our connection to the labour and resources of the products we consume, we must understand our relation to suffering differently than the dichotomy of the fortunate and unfortunate. Perhaps “Me to We” could find corporate sponsors with practices more consistent with the enterprises’ stated values, but this is not my concern so much as the way in which the rhetoric and practices of Me to We paradoxically refuse acknowledgment of our *relationships* to others within international economic and political structures.

Sara Ahmed contends that the obligation of happiness serves to elide the causes of unhappiness. She identifies how feminists “are read as being unhappy, such that situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as *about* the unhappiness of feminists rather than being

what feminists are unhappy *about*” (2010, p. 67, original emphasis). To what extent can happiness be the goal if we are seeking to understand, and respond to, complex problems of social and material inequality? The Kielburger’s counsel to act only in ways that are fun: “A sure sign of a successful project is that it’s enjoyable. So make it fun and celebrate, celebrate, celebrate your achievements” (2006, p. 124). Action, or doing, becomes entwined with a sense of being happy/good. As Ahmed reminds us, however, “we need to think about unhappiness as *more than a feeling that should be overcome*. Unhappiness might offer a pedagogical lesson on the limits of the promise of happiness. If injustice does have unhappy effects, then the story does not end there (2010, p. 217, original emphasis). The “Me to We” philosophy forecloses this lesson. Social action and global education cannot always be enjoyable. The process of investigating how we are inextricably implicated in various conjunctions of power (Andreotti & de Souza 2008, p. 3) requires risk.

### **Race, Gender, Celebrity, and Affiliation**

#### *The Humanitarian Burden: Saviours and Victims*

When I present critical analyses of humanitarianism, such as this, and particularly to audiences of prospective teachers, the anxiety that the “sweatshop sublime” (Robbins, 2002) produces or the argument that development aid effects positive change for donors but not necessarily in the conditions of life for those targeted by such projects seems to foreclose the possibility of any action at all. Yet such a reaction reveals the way in which “action” has been constructed as something outside of our normal daily experience, as if we are not acting until we help build a school in Latin America or organize a fundraiser. Recognition that all of our actions occur within a social and economic system and have myriad unseen consequences disrupts the clear set of culturally normative responses that “Me to We” actively promotes: humanitarian travel, fundraising for charities, volunteering, and random acts of kindness. Through a critical literacy approach, which seeks to disrupt the commonplace, allow for the interrogation of multiple viewpoints, and focus on social and political issues rather than personal attitudes and behaviours (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys 2002, p. 382), I think we can recast the relation of acting/being that is produced within humanitarian lifestyle brand marketing.

In part this requires examining not just the content of “Me to We” marketing, but the relation of the content to the form. Writing of the formal colonial period, W.E.B. Du Bois notes that “Empires do not want nosy busybodies snooping into their territories and business. Visitors to colonies are, to be sure, allowed and even encouraged; but their tours are arranged, officials guide them in space and thought, and they see usually what the colonial power wants them to see and little more” (2000, p. 284). As the brochure for the Bogani Cottages resort reveals, “Me to We” carefully manages the idea, if not the experience, of the humanitarian traveller. In the same way, the “Me to We” philosophy, as articulated by the Kielburgers and enacted through the various projects of Me to We, guides the youth target audience in space and thought. Rather than exposing their audience to multiple voices and viewpoints, “Me to We” centres the experience of the benefactor and reinforces the message that “making a difference” leads to personal happiness.

The Vow of Silence campaign is one of the primary events in the schools-based “Me to We” Social Action calendar. Youth are urged to “stand up for the voiceless” by vowing not to speak, email, text, etc. for a 24 hour period, raising money for the time that they remain silent. The initiative is aimed at attracting “as much attention as possible to raise awareness and create real social change... to support children who are silenced by the denial of their basic rights” (Free the Children 2011b). Arundhati Roy reminds us that “we know of course there’s really no



such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard” (Roy, 2004). The Vow of Silence campaign, as a pedagogical project, does not encourage students to seek out the stories and viewpoints of those children around the world who are struggling for social justice, like the Pakistani child activist Iqbal Masih, who inspired Craig to create FTC. Indeed, Craig’s story of Iqbal focuses upon his suffering as a labour and his execution, rather than the work he did to challenge the conditions of oppression child workers experience (Kielburger & Kielburger 2006, p. 1-11; CTV, 2010a). The reliance on the idea of “voicelessness” reinforces the idea that impoverished Others are passive victims; it disassociates the work of Me to We from the myriad social movements taking place around the world in which people act to transform structures and practices that produce inequality and hardship.

Further, there is a paradox between Me to We’s message of raising awareness of the plight of the voiceless, and particularly the organization’s focus on alleviating the hardship and suffering of women in the Global South, and its own patriarchal and paternal practices of representation. For instance, of the 18 advertised speakers at the 2010 Vancouver and Toronto We Day events (some of whom appeared at both), 15 were male and 12 were coded as white (CTV, 2010b); the keynote speakers in Vancouver were Martin Sheen, Jesse Jackson, and Al Gore. Although the 2010 event in Toronto included more speakers and musical acts who were racialized (as not white) than past events, including people who are not based in North America, Me to We continues to be fronted primarily by white North American men. The celebration of a teacher and student at the Vancouver event for collecting more than 10 000 pairs of socks for homeless people in the city is particularly indicative of how a neoliberal politics of “post-racialism” is at play in the representational practices of the organization. The spectacle of the two racialized (as not white) women on the stage reflects how the “Me to We” philosophy seems inclusive; it transcends race and nation. Yet, these women were literally silenced, their accomplishments described by the Kielburgers. Similarly, in *Global Voices* (2010), a collection of newspaper columns, Craig and Marc primarily tell the stories of suffering Others (rather than actors in movements for social change), typically relying on European and American development workers, as informants; they speak *of* and *for* the suffering Other elsewhere.

In addition to the performers, celebrities and dignitaries, motivational speakers and corporate CEOs, the “We Day” events focus on the Kielburger brothers, who *figure* the ideals of the “Me to We” philosophy. They educate youth on the need for philanthropy, and encourage them that they can achieve their goals, no matter what they are and how insurmountable they may seem. The “values” of gratitude, compassion, and happiness function as the tropes of a master-narrative that shapes all of the stories they tell. For instance, in his Kelowna speech, Craig described how he spent an afternoon playing football with a group of children in Brazil who survive on the street by “taking care of one another” (2009). At the end of the game, one of the boys gave Craig the shirt off his back. Craig proclaims: “if we all had the compassion of a fourteen year-old street child, there would be no more poverty in this world” (2009; see, Kielburger & Kielburger 2006, p. 262). Chouliaraki argues that the compassionate gift (aid) requires the receiver’s gratitude to the generous donor rather than reciprocation, thereby reinforcing “the social logic of the gift between unequal parties” (Chouliaraki 2010, 113). In this case, however, the exchange is reversed – the impoverished child gives to the humanitarian. However, the boy’s gift demands reciprocation (not aid or uplift). Based on the context Craig provides, the boy’s act does not seem to be informed by compassion, as least not in the way that compassion functions as a value for “Me to We”. Rather, it seems as likely to reflect the performance of an exchange that mimics that of professional footballers. For Kielburger, the boy’s gift – now framed and mounted in his home, he announces – is narrated to represent the extraordinariness of the child’s act of compassion. Kielburger’s narration of this act illuminates

the fact that unlike two professional athletes these two subjects are not equal and the exchange is not born of mutual respect.

*The Kielburger Brothers as Humanitarian “Pop” Stars*

Craig and Marc come to figure “we” in another way, as well. It is not so much their message (the Me to We philosophy) as their identity that serves to produce the “Me to We” brand. The “We Day” spectacles, for instance, work within the tradition of designated days that commemorate particular issues (i.e. World Water Day, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination) and the tradition of entertainment events designed to raise awareness of suffering and hardship (i.e. Live Aid, or the 2005 Live 8 concert). In contrast to these days and events, “We Day” produces a national spectacle publicizing “Me to We”, itself. Indeed, the ideal of happiness, presented in the terms of youth self-esteem, is the focal point as much as is the work of FTC. Based on my experience at the 2010 Vancouver event, the youth audience seems most interested in the bands and the Kielburger brothers.

Unlike many other humanitarian agencies that have enlisted film or music celebrities as spokespeople for their cause, Craig and Marc fulfil the function of the “star” more so than do the featured celebrities. Indeed, it is difficult to separate FTC and “Me to We” from the brothers. For instance, in response to controversy regarding whether FTC was promoting abortion, a board member assured the public that the Kielburgers “never saw [the documents], never helped write them, never authorized them” (Rinaldi 2011). Like other celebrity humanitarians – Bono, Bob Geldoff, etc. – they perform the function of the hero, the “free, lone and courageous White man” (Repo & Yrjölä 2011, p. 51); the organization’s response focused not on the issue but on how that issue might reflect on the two front men. Following his 2009 lecture in Kelowna, a newspaper report described Craig as “the Beatles of good deeds – causing audience members to cry, squeal and glaze-over lovingly when he prompts them to start looking at the world beyond their door steps” (Michaels, 2009, p. A12). The Kielburger brothers entered the packed Rogers Arena in Vancouver through the crowd, clad in “Me to We style”, and were met with deafening screams and tears of joy. Thrusting their fists in the air and boldly and confidently listing their accomplishments against how they have been disparaged as “naïve” and “idealistic” (CTV, 2010a), the brothers act the part of the rebel. As celebrities (Richey & Ponte 2008, p. 724), their person(a) guarantees the management, seriousness, feasibility, and most importantly the “cool quotient” of the organization’s work; but, because they have acquired their celebrity status through their humanitarian work – unlike film or music celebrities who have taken up causes – their authority is beyond question; they represent “Me to We” and the suffering Other.

To move from “Me” to “We” is to become associated with them. The significance of the brothers as representatives of the brand is bound up in both contemporary discourses of celebrity and colonial discourses of the white man’s burden. The Kielburgers enact a post-racial ethic, in that they affirm their authority through their affiliation with figures like the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, but they do not acknowledge the racist histories and racial politics of the inequalities they seek to address. Their presence as models of the Me to We lifestyle brand relies upon presumptions of race, gender, and heteronormativity. In her brief testimonial during the Vancouver “We Day” event, CTV President for Creative, Content, and Channels, Susanne Boyce’s aside to the audience that she has Craig and Marc’s phone numbers precipitated screams and glee by the largely female audience (We Day, 2010). The persona of the young male pop star, and his relation to the “girl” fan, is reinforced by Me to We’s cultivation of associations with Miss Teen Canada World and VerveGirl.com. The brothers perform a “muscular Christianity”, which Daniel Coleman has traced as a significant literary figure in the

production of Canada's "white civility". The "untiring and virile physical body" of the white pioneer – in this case the Kielburgers, as performed on the "We Day" stage – is "balanced by his spiritually sensitive heart" (Coleman, 2006, p. 129). Their attraction, and hence the organization's "aura", comes from how they perform a hyper-masculine heterosexuality (strong, attractive, confident), at the same time that they are seemingly selfless, altruistic, and compassionate.

In many ways, "Me to We" provides an example of what Lillie Chouliaraki describes as "post-humanitarian communication" (2010, p.119), but unlike the branding initiatives that she analyzes, the "Me to We" brand functions not simply to draw attention to the work of an organization. The performance of the brand *is* the work, living the "Me to We" lifestyle. Becoming "we" is as easy as liking the enterprise's Facebook page. Or it is acting compassionately in one's daily life. Or it is travelling to Kenya to be personally transformed by the experience of taking part in FTC development work. The promise isn't simply fulfilling the obligation to help others but of happiness and fulfillment for the individual consumer. The educational initiatives of "Me to We" do not foster critical analysis of global economic and social relationships and do not engage with the myriad and diverse voices of persistence, resistance, and social action in the places FTC seeks to "aid" and "empower"; instead, "Me to We" markets affiliation with the idea of "we", the brand, and its celebrity front-men.

#### *Acknowledgment:*

Research for this article has been conducted with the support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Standard Research Grant. I would also like to thank Heather Picotte for her research on the corporate sponsors of We Day.

#### *References*

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Andreotti, V. & L.M. de Souza. (2008). Editor's preface. *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practice*. 2(1), 3-4.
- Birrell, I. (2010) Before you pay to volunteer abroad, think of the harm you might do. *The Observer*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/14/orphans-cambodia-aids-holidays-madonna>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge UP.
- Bradburn, H. dir. (2010). *Chocolate: The Bitter Truth*. BBC Panorama. Cadbury (n.d). The Cocoa Tree. Retrieved July 30, 2011, from <http://www.cadbury.co.uk/cadburyandchocolate/howchocolateismade/Pages/fromtrees.aspx>
- Chouliaraki, L. (2010) "Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian communication beyond a politics of pity" *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13 (2), 107-126.
- Coleman, D. (2006). *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*. Toronto: UP Toronto.
- Cottle, S. & D. Nolan (2007). Global humanitarianism and the changing media-field. *Journalism Studies*, 8(6), 862-878.

- CTV (2010a). CTV presents: We Day 2010. Retrieved from [http://watch.ctv.ca/we-day-2010/special/we-day-2010---ctv-presents-we-day-2010/?cid=weday\\_marquee\\_broadcast\\_spec#clip368002](http://watch.ctv.ca/we-day-2010/special/we-day-2010---ctv-presents-we-day-2010/?cid=weday_marquee_broadcast_spec#clip368002)
- CTV (2010b). Your guide to watching the We Day webcast. Retrieved from <http://shows.ctv.ca/weday/ForEducators.aspx>
- Doerr, E. (2011) Cognitive dissonance in international service-learning: Possibilities and challenges for service-learning pedagogy. In B.J. Porfilio and H. Hickman. (Eds.). *Critical Service-Learning as Revolutionary Pedagogy*. Charlotte: Information Age, 71-94.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 2000. The disfranchised colonies. *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies, Volume 1*. D. Brydon. (Ed.) Routledge, 282-309.
- The End of Poverty (2009). Social movements featured. Retrieved from [http://www.theendofpoverty.com/social\\_movements\\_kenya.html](http://www.theendofpoverty.com/social_movements_kenya.html)
- Free the Children (2011a). Intl. programs. Retrieved from <http://www.freethechildren.com/whatwedo/international/>
- Free the Children (2011b). Vow of silence campaign. Retrieved from <http://www.freethechildren.com/getinvolved/youth/campaigns/campaigns.php?type=vowofsilence/>
- Global Exchange (2011). Fair trade cocoa campaign. Retrieved from <http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/fairtrade/cocoa/>
- Guttentag, D. (2009). The possible negative impacts of volunteer tourism. *International Journal of Tourism Research* 11, 537-551.
- Harvey, D. (2006) Neo-liberalism as creative destruction. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 88:2, 145–158.
- Herrmann, S. (2011) Holding on to transformation: Reflections on global service learning. In B.J. Porfilio and H. Hickman (Eds.). *Critical Service-Learning as Revolutionary Pedagogy*. Charlotte: Information Age, pp. 273-296.
- Human Sciences Research Council (2010). Inside the thriving industry of AIDS Orphan tourism. Retrieved from [http://www.hsrc.ac.za/HSRC\\_Review\\_Article-195.phtml](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/HSRC_Review_Article-195.phtml)
- Jefferess, D. (2002) Neither Seen Nor Heard: The Idea of the “Child” as Impediment to the Rights of Children. *Topia: A Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 7 (Spring): 75-97.
- . (2008) Global Citizenship and the Cultural Politics of Benevolence. *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices* 2(1), 27-36.
- Kantai, P. (2008) The Maasai invasions. *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits: an anthology*. Ed. Rasna Warah. Author House, 57-78.
- Kielburger, C. (2009) Keynote. Global Citizen Kelowna Week. Kelowna, B.C., Canada, March.
- Kielburger, C. & M. Kielburger (2006). *Me to We: Finding Meaning in a Material World*. Toronto: Wiley.
- Kielburger, C. & M. Kielburger (2010). *Global Voices – The Compilation: Volume 1*. D. Davidson & C. Mallinos. (Eds.) Vancouver: Greystone.
- Klein, N. (2000). *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Toronto: Vintage.
- Lewison, M., Flint, M.A., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts* 79(5), 382-392.

- Mahrouse, G. (2010). Questioning efforts that seek to “do good”: insights from transnational solidarity activism and socially responsible tourism. In *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. S. Razack, M. Smith, and S. Thobani (Eds.). Toronto: Between the Lines, pp. 169-190.
- Me to We (2011a). Me to We Is. Retrieved from <http://www.metowe.com/me-to-we-is/>
- Me to We (2011b). Retrieved July 30 2011, from
- Me to We (2011c). Youth Volunteer Trips. Retrieved from <http://www.metowe.com/trips/youth/>
- Me to We (N.D.). Volunteer Adventures at Bogani Cottages, Kenya. Retrieved July 30, 2011, from [http://www.metowe.com/docs/trips/Bogani%20Cottages\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.metowe.com/docs/trips/Bogani%20Cottages_brochure.pdf)
- Michaels, K. (2009, March 15). Free the Children founder praises Kelowna’s awareness. *The Capital News*.
- Nature’s Path (2011a). Do good facts. Retrieved from <http://www.naturespath.com/do-good/nature-facts>
- Nature’s Path (2011b). Meet the organic farmer. Retrieved from <http://www.naturespath.com/familyfarms>
- Nature’s Path (2011c). Our minifesto. Retrieved from <http://www.naturespath.com/company/minifesto>
- Off, C. (2007). *Bitter Chocolate: Investigating the Dark Side of the World’s Most Seductive Sweet*. Toronto: Random House.
- Repo, J. & R. Yrjölä. (2011) The gender politics of celebrity humanitarianism in Africa. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 13(1), 44-62.
- Richey, L.A. & S. Ponte. (2008). Better (Red)<sup>TM</sup> than dead? Celebrities, consumption and international aid. *Third World Quarterly*. 29(4), 711-729.
- Rinaldi, L. (2011). Free the Children refutes allegations it supports abortion. *The B.C. Catholic*. Retrieved from <http://bcc.rcav.org/canadian/895-luc-rinaldi>
- Robbins, B. (2002). The sweatshop sublime. *PMLA* 117(1), 84-97.
- Roy, A. (2004). Peace and the new corporate liberation theology. Consumercide.com. Retrieved from <http://www.consumercide.com/js/index.php/politics/42-inequaility/248-peace-a-the-new-corporate-liberation-theology-arundhati-roy.html>
- Simpson, K. (2005). Doing Development: the gap year, volunteer tourists and a popular practice of development. *Journal of International Development* 16(5), 681-692.
- Wainaina, B. (2008). The power of love. *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits: an anthology*. R. Warah (Ed.). Author House, 87-92.
- Wisowaty, R. (2009). Me to We Speakers Robin Wisowaty. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfzuqcuatWg>
- We Day (2010). Roger’s Centre. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. October 15.
- We Schools In Action Program Guide. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.weday.com/teach/weschools>