

Review - Volunteer Tourism in the Global South

Written by Cori Jakubiak

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CORI JAKUBIAK, SEP 21 2015

Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times

By: Wanda Vrasti

New York: Routledge, 2015.

Wanda Vrasti's *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times* (2015) inserts a much-needed Continental perspective into the wider academic discussion of volunteer tourism, or short-term, alternative travel that combines unskilled volunteering and Global South holidaying. Vrasti's fine-grained, theoretical analysis of why and how volunteer tourism has "come to occupy a (suspiciously) firm moral grounding that *demands* applause" [p. 4, emphasis in original] in the current historical moment makes an important contribution to the field at large and fills a critical gap in the literature.

Extolled by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), commercial tourism operators, and government actors alike as an exemplary form of civic engagement, volunteer tourism has grown exponentially in recent years as an ethical form of consumption and third sector aid. Most participants in volunteer tourism programs are White, middle-class, traditionally-aged college students or early career professionals, and the projects in which they participate while abroad operate in the names of environmental conservation, community development, education, childcare, and public health. While professional credentials are not required to participate in most volunteer tourism programs, the fees to organizational sponsors can be substantial (e.g., over \$2000.00 for a 10-day project excluding airfare; see <http://www.unitedplanet.org>). As Vrasti points out, however, new initiatives are emerging at the state level in various countries to assure that even financial hardship does not preclude young peoples' abilities to participate in volunteer tourism (see the U.K.'s International Citizen Service, <http://www.volunteerics.org/> and the U.S. initiative, Volunteers for Prosperity, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/volunteers-prosperity-program-authorization-signed-law>).

But why is this so? According to Vrasti, it is because volunteer tourism operates mainly as a form of political subjectivity, one "that, in its fidelity to neoliberal injunctions, embodies a new normative ideal" [p. 4]. Said differently, by participating in volunteer tourism, young, Global North people develop the multicultural dispositions and cosmopolitan sensibilities congruent with the logic of late capitalism. These dispositions and sensibilities are not aimed toward radical social change, but are instead funneled into corporate-friendly global competencies: competencies that allow young or aspirant professionals greater purchase on a middle class future.

The book is comprised of five chapters. After introducing her thesis, chapter one explains Vrasti's research methodology: a combination of ethnography and Foucaudian archaeology. In order to "capture the complex logic of volunteer tourism, which [Vrasti] understand[s] as an innovative strategy of government reflective of contemporary transformations in capitalist production, consumption and citizenship practices" [p. 12], the book's analysis draws upon data collected through participant-observation in two volunteer tourism programs (one in Guatemala, one in Ghana) and qualitative interviews with other in-service volunteers. These data are put in dialogue with Foucault's archaeological method, which "examines the conditions under which regimes of practices come into being, are maintained and are transformed" [Dean cited in Vrasti 2013, p. 18]. This application of Continental theory to ethnographic data, Vrasti argues, is essential for understanding the duplicity and complexity of our current predicament, where radical aspirations for community, autonomy, and human dignity are systematically placed in the

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service of market imperatives and disciplinary rule. [p. 20] In other words, Vrasti's chosen methodology not only helps to account for volunteer tourism's rising and sustained popularity, but also sheds light on how even charitable impulses can be co-opted by the interests of capital.

Chapter two of the book, "The Self as Enterprise," addresses one of volunteer tourism's central ironies: although the unskilled labor of volunteer tourists rarely alters the material conditions of the communities they visit, volunteer tourism remains a widely supported form of humanitarian intervention. This is because, as Vrasti notes, "while volunteer tourism takes place in the Global South, its effects are valorized in terms of the governmental rationalities and socio-economic conditions of advanced neoliberal societies" [p. 28]. It does not matter whether volunteer tourism actually redistributes wealth, brings valued technical or professional assistance to Global South people, or redresses the structural conditions that underlie poverty. Rather, volunteer tourism "works" because it fosters the entrepreneurial, self-regulating citizenship of volunteers. This form of subjectivity aligns with the prerogatives of neoliberal governmentality, which Vrasti deftly explains in this chapter using the works of David Harvey, Michel Foucault, and scholars working in the autonomist Marxist tradition. Indeed, Vrasti's well-written explication of neoliberal governmentality here renders this chapter useful as a stand-alone text for instructors looking to provide advanced undergraduate or new graduate students with an accessible account of the topic.

Chapter three, "Multicultural Sensibilities in Guatemala," draws upon data collected through participant-observation in a small, locally-run volunteer tourism program to demonstrate how volunteers, in the face of "not feeling needed," romanticized rural Guatemala in ways that depoliticized diversity and difference. Perceiving their service projects as having little value and local residents as "not poor enough" to merit assistance, volunteers turned their time and attention to immersing themselves in and gazing at the local community. Lacking a political pedagogy for understanding the social and economic forces that have produced contemporary, rural Guatemala, however, volunteers equated (visible) poverty with cultural difference and material privation with heritage. This simplistic view of diversity, Vrasti opines, "reduces the material and historical origins of difference to benign aesthetic categories ready for private consumption" [p. 77]. To be sure, by insisting that life in rural Guatemala was more "authentic" and closer to nature than life in the industrialized North, volunteer tourists cast Global South poverty as a curated "lifestyle"—one that has rejuvenating powers for short-term (i.e., Northern) visitors and should therefore be safeguarded against change.

Chapter four, "Entrepreneurial Education in Ghana," draws upon data collected through participant-observation in a large, commercially-sponsored volunteer tourism program. As in Guatemala, Vrasti notes that the projects to which volunteers were assigned were disorganized and often perceived by volunteers as having little to no impact on local communities. As a result, volunteer tourists in Ghana spent much of their time in ex-pat bars, hotels, and internet cafes. However, as Vrasti argues, what one actually *does* on a volunteer tourism trip is irrelevant, especially in Africa. Because the Global North constructs a generalized "Africa" as a site of unruliness and lack, simply participating in a volunteer tourism program there suggests adaptability, resourcefulness, and bravery. These qualities constitute what managerial discourse refers to as "soft skills": important forms of distinction in an era of devalued educational credentials and rapid middle class enclosure. "[V]olunteer tourism is an educational strategy designed to enhance the employability and economic vitality of young adults in an increasingly competitive and precarious economic climate," Vrasti writes [p. 87]. Indeed, because the measure of volunteer tourism's worth is tied to having participated in it at all, volunteers endured homesickness, feelings of irrelevance, and what they termed "reverse racism"—or having their Whiteness pointed out to them in new and unfamiliar ways—for the sake of earning others' admiration and forms of capital that will hold value into the future.

As Vrasti concludes in chapter five, "volunteer tourism is one of several contemporary practices . . . meant to provide capital with the 'forms of sociality and subjectivity' it needs to reproduce itself" [p. 119]. Volunteer tourism, as Vrasti makes clear, is a highly seductive practice: it appropriates young peoples' desires to "make a difference" in the world through global travel. It simultaneously hedges their bets against uncertain social futures by equipping volunteers with novel forms of distinction. In an era of massive underemployment and few public safety nets, Vrasti argues, those who participate in volunteer tourism are "desperately trying to live up to the demands of neoliberal subjectivity" [p. 132]. Yet, because volunteer tourism insists that seemingly intractable social problems can be addressed quickly and easily through unskilled labor and short-term, pleasurable encounters with difference, it ultimately works in the

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service of neoliberal capital. It (re)produces citizens who see ethical consumption as the beginning and end of civic engagement, and it does little to help volunteers understand the broad systems of global injustice in which all people participate. As Vrasti notes, one of these systems of injustice is the way in which even political rights are increasingly being distributed according to market logic. Cosmopolitan, “flexible” citizens [Ong cited in Vrasti 2013] (such as volunteer tourists) have unprecedented forms of mobility, purchasing power, and access to various “lifestyle” choices in ways that “static and suspect populations” [p. 130]—that is, the recipients’ of volunteers’ service—do not. In a tragic sort of feedback loop, then, volunteer tourism bolsters the very formations that produce the human suffering volunteer tourism claims to address. Examining our attachments to ethical consumption practices such as volunteer tourism, Vrasti suggests, may be one way out of this cycle, and her book provides a solid foundation for proceeding with just this task.

About the author:

Cori Jakubiak is an Assistant Professor of education at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa, USA. Her research takes a critical perspective on English-language voluntourism, or short-term, volunteer English language teaching in the Global South. She has written about English-language voluntourism in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* and in the edited volumes, the *Corporatization and Globalization of Education: The Limits and Liminality of the Market Mantra* (2013) and *Moral Encounters in Tourism* (2014). Her most recent manuscript on the topic is forthcoming in the *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*. She can be reached at: jakubiak@grinnell.edu.