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Emotion, Volunteer-Tourism and Marginalised Youth

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Introduction

The satirical news site ‘The Onion’ recently ran a piece entitled ‘6-Day Visit to Rural African Village Completely Changes Woman’s Facebook Profile Picture’ (The Onion, 2014). The humour of the piece relied on our familiarity with short volunteer-tourism trips to ‘developing countries’ as a widespread social practice in the Global North, and the claims made that such brief experiences are ‘extraordinary’ and ‘transformative’ with a hyperbolic emotion that is – ironically – becoming somewhat banal. But the wry laughter is followed by wider questions: why are such experiences surrounded by emotive claims of transformation? Are they as emotionally powerful as their participants’ claims suggest? If so, why? What is emotionality doing – what force is it exerting upon the participants or enabling them to exert upon the world around them? How are the emotional dynamics of such experiences playing into the way young people see themselves as subjects and negotiate their place in society?

This chapter discusses research about short volunteer-tourism trips, hereafter referred to as ‘voluntourism’, undertaken by youth groups based in low-income neighbourhoods in London, travelling to Kenya and Zimbabwe. Exploring the experiences of a socio-economically and ethnically diverse range of young people adds nuance to debates around youth and international volunteering, which have tended to emphasise the dominance and privilege of the archetypal middle-class, white volunteer. Looking at young volunteers more marginally situated in their ‘home’ context prompts us to think beyond this rather too neat (though valuable) critique, and ask questions about the multi-layered power dynamics surrounding these ‘global encounters’. Looking at the role of
emotion and affect in voluntourism has the potential to add much to our understanding of the power and potentialities in these mobilities.

This chapter will argue that emotion saturates the volunteering encounter, in ways that both fuel highly problematic power relations and also contain the potential to disrupt these power relations. The trips contain strong, expected emotional ‘scripts’, as both youth workers and young people see certain emotions as providing the ‘catalyst’ for – and other emotions as evidence of – transformation. However, young people’s emotions also exceed and conflict with these expected emotional scripts. Drawing on feminist theorisations of how emotions constitute social relations and subjects (Ahmed, 2004), I argue that emotional ‘cues’ and affective forces around voluntourism are implicated in an ongoing process of re-inscribing neo-colonial relations, and also in shaping young subjects well suited to life under neoliberalism. However, the emotions of young people from socially marginal backgrounds negotiate and speak back to these forces, as they speak of their hopes and fears amid severely constrained opportunities in the UK. The chapter calls both scholars and youth work practitioners to think more critically about emotions as produced by and productive of the broader landscapes of power around both the ‘global encounters’ of voluntourism and interventions aimed at marginalised youth, and to make space to listen to the ways young people’s ambivalent emotions might contribute to disrupting problematic power relations.

Theoretical groundings

This chapter is concerned with how emotions help produce social relations, subjectivities and identities. The challenge of making sense of emotions can be seen in the sprawling literature around the terms ‘emotion’ and ‘affect’. Here, I conceive of emotions not as ‘fixed’ phenomena that can be understood straightforwardly, at face value, but as ‘slippery’ things – fluid and performative. Crucially, feminist thinkers emphasise the ways in which performed emotions, seemingly ‘new’ and ‘personal’, are always shaped by – and shape – embodied histories of social relations, prejudice and inequality. Collective bodies surface via emotional contact and ‘impressions’ of others: ‘it is through the intensification of feeling that bodies and worlds materialise and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, fixity and surface is produced’ (Ahmed, 2004, p. 29). However, theorisations of ‘affect’ also help us recognise affective forces which exceed representation as ‘nameable states’ of emotion, stretch beyond consciousness and have a transpersonal force (Thrift, 2004). This