Abstract

This thesis examines images of volunteer tourism—or voluntourism—on internet sites and describes how the photographs that appear on them contribute to maintaining global systems of power. Voluntourism is defined as either the payment of a program fee to an organization to travel to a developing country to perform various volunteer tasks or as the pause of gainful employment in one’s own country to work for an extended period of time in a developing country at a local wage. Currently there is debate as to the real benefits of volunteer tourism: is it truly the sustainable form of responsible, alternative tourism it is intended to be, or does it merely replicate the conditions of mass tourism and exploit those it is intended to benefit?

This study explores visual representations of voluntourism in non-Western cultures in developing countries, and the consumption of those representations by participants in Canadian-based volunteer tourism organizations. The primary focus is photographs of interpersonal relationships between “voluntourists” and “voluntoured” in an examination of how culture and skin colour are manipulated in an attempt to maintain Westerners’ positions of power in pictures and, by extension, in global power relations. I suggest that a complex interaction of the pictorial codes of tourism, colonialism and the popular media converge in voluntourism’s photographs, resulting in images that simultaneously offer potential volunteers the opportunity to “do good” in the world as well as to consume cultural difference as a commodity.

The main body of work is a visual discourse analysis of the photographs of five Canadian volunteer organizations’ websites. I identify the thematic categories used to promote voluntourism and discuss them in relation to patterns of mass tourism, charity
advertisements, colonial travel narratives and their associated visual representation. This paper includes interviews with Canadian past volunteers to assess the importance of images to their experience of voluntourism. I close with a discussion of multiculturalism in Canada which brings together the experience of working within another culture in voluntourism and the conditions of Canadian multicultural society.
There are a number of people without whom this thesis would never have been accomplished. I would like to thank Ted Jackson and Sulley Gariba for offering me the opportunity to participate in international development and the international volunteer community: without them I would never have found inspiration. I would like to thank the twelve volunteers—some of whom are firm friends—who took the time to speak with me about their experiences volunteering abroad. Without them, this project would have little value. I thank Carissa DiGangi, Ciara Murphy and the kittens for their invaluable feedback, support and friendship. I thank my father for asking too many questions and my mother for reading my drafts when she could. Thanks to Susan Lord for being a friendly sounding board, cheerleader and lender of books. Also thanks to Karen Dubinsky for donating portions of her tourism library to this study. I am eternally in the debt of Lynda Jessup for her kind, firm guidance through the intricacies of academic arguments and punctuation, and for giving me the confidence to continue in this project. Finally, I thank my love, Court, for doing what he does best and for being behind me (and beside me) for every day of this journey.
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List of Acronyms

CCI: Canadian Crossroads International-Carrefour Canadien Internationale

CECI: Centre d’études et de coopération internationale-Canadian Centre for International Studies and Cooperation

CESO-SACO: Canadian Executive Service Organization

CIC: Citizenship and Immigration Canada

CIDA: Canadian International Development Agency

CUSO: Canadian University Service Overseas (now part of CUSO-VSO)

CWY-JCM: Canada World Youth-Jeunesse Canada Monde

IMF: International Monetary Fund

MDGs: Millennium Development Goals

WB: World Bank

UN: United Nations

UNDP: United Nations Development Program

VSO: Voluntary Service Overseas (now part of CUSO-VSO)
Chapter 1. Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction
Our culture teaches us how to see. In the “scopic regime of contemporary [Western] culture” (Crouch and Lübbren 9) particularly, sight is a vital part of the production of knowledge and the perception of “truth.” Many have theorized the value and importance of sight; the physical visual sense; and the capture and re-presentation of instances of sight in painting and photography. In recent years the focus has shifted to electronically generated and disseminated images. It has been suggested by scholars that images in popular media—photographs, television, film, magazines, newspapers and the internet—are not constructed for the critical subject (Fuery and Fuery 2), nor are individuals necessarily prepared to look at images critically (Weintraub 198). This thesis examines images of volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, on internet sites and describes how these photographs contribute to maintaining global systems of power.

Voluntourism can be defined as: the payment of a program fee to an organization to travel to a developing country to perform various volunteer tasks (such as teaching, building, public health outreach or conservation work) or as the pause of gainful employment in one’s own country to work for an extended period of time in a developing country at a local wage.¹ Voluntourism was created as an alternative to mass tourism in a

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¹ The terms “developing country” and “voluntourism” require further explanation. “Developing country” is often used to describe the national economies of countries that exist in what used to be called the “Third World.” Barbara Heron describes the term in Desire for Development, which most often refers to once-colonies in Africa, Southern and South East Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America (placed in opposition to developed areas of Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand). Heron also uses “Northern” and “Western” opposed to “Southern” and “Eastern.” Like her, I acknowledge that these distinctions are part of a binary system of classification which, while essentializing, can serve to illustrate current power dynamics between different parts of the globe (Heron 157). “Voluntourism” or “volunteer tourism” has many definitions. K. D. Lyons and S. Wearing describe definitions that limit voluntourism to experiences within a vacation or holiday framework as “narrow” and broaden their definition to a very general “form of contested alternative tourism” (4). The aspects of voluntourism I identify in this thesis (holiday
perceived effort to promote more responsible, sustainable and more culturally relevant tourism that benefits both the tourist and the “toured” (see Lyons and Wearing 4). Many forms of voluntourism work towards various development goals, such as poverty reduction or “education for all.”

Currently there is debate as to the real benefits of volunteer tourism: is it truly a sustainable form of responsible, alternative tourism, or does it merely replicate the conditions of mass tourism and exploit those it is intended to benefit?

R. Spencer writes that “voluntourists” distinguish themselves from the mainstream tourist in claiming that they are “not just interested in meeting the exotic ‘Other’ as objects to be viewed [as in mass tourism], but rather they are engaged in what they perceive to be meaningful contact with local people in order to exchange ideas and information about development issues” (qtd. in Lyons and Wearing 42). While activities on the ground may differ substantially from mass tourism, both voluntourists and “regular” tourists rely on promotional materials, including photographs, for information. As such, the treatment and content of promotional photographs is vital to the nature of the relationship between the viewer and the viewed (the soon to be voluntourist and “voluntoured”). It is photographs with which this thesis is concerned.

This study explores visual representations of voluntourism in non-Western cultures in developing countries, and the consumption of those representations by participants in Canadian-based volunteer tourism organizations. These organizations are CUSO-VSO (formerly Canadian University Service Overseas and Voluntary Service

voluntourism and paid volunteering at a local wage) fall within this definition. I discuss contestations of the term “voluntourism” as applied to individual experience in chapter five.

2 These are two of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which are discussed in more detail in chapter six. Organizations which are not directly connected to UN programming still work to achieve these goals.
Overseas), Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO), Canadian Crossroads International (CCI), Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI) and Canada World Youth (CWY). My focus is the representation of interpersonal relationships between voluntourists and voluntoured and how culture—and in many cases, colour—is manipulated to attempt to maintain Westerners’ positions of power in images and by extension, in global power relations. I work from the definition of representation as posited by Elizabeth Chaplin in Sociology and Visual Representation: that images and texts “do not reflect their sources but refashion them according to pictorial or textual codes, so that they are quite separate from, and other than, those sources” (1). I suggest that a complex interaction of the pictorial codes of tourism, colonialism and the popular media converge in voluntourism’s photographs, resulting in images that simultaneously offer potential volunteers the opportunity to “do good” in the world as well as to consume cultural difference as a commodity. As a result, returned volunteers acquire cultural capital that can be used for personal and professional gain at home in the West.

I begin by situating my study in relation to previous scholarship on the meeting points of tourism and colonialism with an added emphasis on the visual systems used to represent these activities. To this discussion, I add a consideration of the history of

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3 Acronyms are further explained in chapter two. Note that CUSO-VSO is now known only by its acronym.
4 Pierre Bourdieu outlines cultural capital as cultural goods transmitted (by a person) whose value as cultural capital varies with the distance between the value imposed on the cultural goods by the dominant culture, and the value given to the cultural goods by the person’s social group or class (Bourdieu and Passeron 30). In the case of voluntourism, access to the activity and designation of volunteering abroad as a valuable pursuit are most common in middle to upper class groups, particularly university students (who as such are already immensely privileged be it through wealth, academic education, or both). “Experience” accumulated in the field and (especially if done as part of a university program) contributes to the cultural capital already acquired through post-secondary education (see Simpson, 17). It would be worth examining Bourdieu’s argument that the educational institution reproduces itself and the dominant social order through its own practices (see Bourdieu and Passeron 210) in conjunction with university students’ participation in voluntourism and the subsequent relationship to international development and the institutions which secure their own practices, such as CIDA or the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). These issues arise in the current paper, but deserve much more attention than this project could provide.
photography and visual representation in popular media (specifically periodicals and travelogues or guides) as well as recent scholarship on voluntourism and international development. Next, I outline my theoretical framework and methodology, which I follow with a chapter devoted to visual theory. My main body of work is a visual discourse analysis of the photographs of five Canadian international volunteer organizations’ websites. I identify thematic categories that each of these websites use to promote voluntourism and discuss them in relation to patterns of mass tourism, charity advertisements, colonial travel narratives and their associated visual representation.

I am concerned with how Westerners learn about and position themselves within “cultures” and “the world” when sources of visual information are almost uniformly Western-based. I am most concerned with how this visual information affects Canadian participants and their understanding of their own cultural identity in the Canadian multicultural context which is deeply influenced by the circulation of electronic media (Littleton x).\(^5\) To that end, I conduct interviews with Canadian past participants of voluntourism to assess the importance of images to their experience of voluntourism. I also address connections between being “Canadian” and volunteer values. I close with a discussion of multiculturalism in Canada which brings together the experience of working within another culture in voluntourism and the conditions of Canadian multicultural society.

It is not my intention to pass judgment on the merit or necessity of voluntourism organizations, their donors or their recipient countries or organizations. In 2008 I

\(^5\) Kate Simpson’s study focuses on how British youths produce knowledge about others (i.e. non-British persons) through the structured experience of the gap year (17). My study differentiates itself by treating knowledge produced about “others” while volunteering abroad as applicable within the volunteers’ home environment: multicultural Canada.
participated in voluntourism as I define it by taking an internship at a public policy firm in the Northern Region of Ghana for three and a half months. My experiences there caused me to question the politics of aid and development, especially the involvement of Western volunteers, and so led to this thesis. I acknowledge that, at the time aid programs were founded, recipient countries (whether by democratic process or not) consented to have volunteers enter their territories to work in a variety of capacities. As per Ali Behdad (11-12), power relations between the West and developing countries are more dynamic and more complicated than this paper addresses. I choose to look at how Western, specifically Canadian organizations, spread their ideals to their own people, within their own country, rather than focus on Western influences abroad. The influence within Canada is sufficient to affect domestic and international relations on many levels.

I do not trivialize the very real material difficulties faced by many people around the world. Rather, I show that voluntourism advertisements draw on implicit notions of Western superiority by visually manipulating conditions of extreme poverty: subtle links are forged between race and development, with Western viewers conferring superior, “developed” status on Western volunteers. “Underdeveloped” and therefore inferior status is left for the populations of colour who are made to symbolize the need for intervention in the developing world. As more young people participate in voluntourism and various other forms of development work, the adequacy of preparation and the formation of a “politics of accountability” (Heron 144) are paramount. An understanding

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6 See Jean Baudrillard’s argument, “Controlled Desublimation” (84-87) in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, especially his footnote on aid. See also Barbara Heron’s chapter, “Participants’ Retrospectives: Complicating Desire” (123-143), as well as chapter five of this thesis, for further examples of post-placement reckoning.

7 Simpson calls for similar action in the creation of “a pedagogy of the gap year” which would turn voluntourism into a more “critically engaged, analytical experience” (222).
of the contribution of images to the perception of international development work and volunteerism could complicate and challenge current notions of the West’s “accountability,” which at the present time seems to be based largely on guilt (Wang 140).

**Literature Review**

Images of voluntourism intersect several fields of scholarship: tourism studies; visual studies; visual ethnography and photography; journalism; post-colonial studies and global development studies. I begin with scholarship surrounding the history of the practice of tourism as it is known it today in the West in general and in Canada specifically. Next I discuss pertinent scholarship dealing with the development and history of photography and its contribution to tourism and colonialism’s visual systems. This discussion serves to establish historical continuities in representing the West’s “other.” Finally, I discuss very recent scholarship surrounding voluntourism and its role in international development.

**A Brief History of Mass Tourism** In *Grand Tours and Cook’s Tours*, Lynne Withey covers the evolution of tourism in the West. She argues that tourism as we know it today has its origins in the “grand tours” of Europe that began in the sixteenth century (x). These were lengthy tours taken by English gentlemen as an elaborate form of instruction in languages, arts and most importantly the history of the Continent. Northern Europe asserted itself as the heart of civilization in the eighteenth century by claiming the Greek and Roman legacy as its own (Pratt 12). Northern Europeans—Britons specifically—maintained their connection to their imperial roots via the well-beaten path of the grand tour: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy. Tours expanded eastward to include Austria, Switzerland, Greece and Turkey and would later include Egypt and
Palestine (Withey 223-262). The structure of the grand tour set a precedent for later forms of organized tourism, as an activity that was restricted to the upper classes, which had both the time and means to participate.\(^8\)

It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the working class would begin to travel or have leisure time. John Urry’s history of tourism in Britain, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, focuses on mass working-class tourism as distinct from the upper class activities of the grand tour. One of the forerunners of middle and working class tourism in Britain was Thomas Cook, whose travel agency “Cook’s Tours” (formed in 1841 and now prominent around the world) was the first of its kind (see Wang, 2; Kröller, 34-36; Lash and Urry 254; Withey 135-136; Urry 24).\(^9\)

Voluntourism today takes place mostly in the global South, usually in Africa, South and South East Asia, and South and Central America; it also exists in the Caribbean and Eastern Europe. Travel to exotic Eastern or “Oriental” locations was popularized in the late nineteenth century when Cook’s Tours expanded to include Egypt and the Holy Land (Withey 258-261). These experiences were highly controlled.\(^10\) British tour operators like Cook had a considerable advantage in that the majority of exotic destinations were British colonies, already primed for European visitors.\(^11\)

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\(^8\) See Baudrillard’s discussion of the symbolic function of leisure time (of the ruling class) in *Political Economy of the Sign* (76-77).

\(^9\) Cook’s first tour was from Loughborough to Leicester for a temperance meeting. Cook maintained his dedication to the Christian faith throughout his career and was an advocate for intercultural cooperation and friendship (Urry 24). Cook’s Tours laid the ground work not only for secular travel and tour agencies but for contemporary Christian missionary groups, both of which are active in voluntourism. For further discussion on the integral part Cook played in the advent of organized tourism, see Scott Lash and John Urry’s *Economies of Signs and Space*.

\(^10\) Control in the East was achieved most notably through the hired locals who wore traditional Arab dress but in Cook’s signature red and blue. “Cook’s Porter” was written across their chests to advertise their “legitimacy” (Withey 258-261).

\(^11\) A similar safety net exists in voluntourism, where the experience of socially and economically unstable environments is filtered through the participant’s affiliation with an organization (with established relationships in the destination country) and subsequent protection by that organization.
Grand tours did not reach Canada until later in the nineteenth century. *British American Magazine* wrote in 1863 that the grand tour strengthened the bond “between colony and motherland to whom the colonist “owe[s] and cheerfully acknowledge[s] a profound allegiance”” (qtd. in Kröller 45). Cecilia Morgan in *A Happy Holiday: English Canadians and Transatlantic Tourism, 1870-1930* and Eva-Marie Kröller in *Canadian Travellers in Europe, 1851-1900* both chronicle the early years of tourism from Canada starting in the mid-nineteenth century. Morgan writes that for Canadian tourists, “being Canadian and a member of the ‘British world’ was underpinned by a sense of belonging to a community of what they expressly considered to be civilized and superior men and women” (364). Colonialism made tourism possible: the notion of Empire, of civilisation and superiority, made it desirable. Canada’s ties to Britain are still strong: British colonial traditions are therefore part of Canadian history and its current cultural fabric. The bonds between practices of colonialism and tourism and the people who practiced them were reinforced through the art and literature that defined the colonial era.

*Tourism, Travel and the Visual* Until recently, the scholarship surrounding representation that sought to depict the West’s “other” focused largely on written works. With the exception of accompanying illustrations, images of “exotic” peoples (non-Western colonial subjects) and places were created for audiences “back home” through

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12 Eva Mackey notes the danger of applying research into the British colonial context to the Canadian context, citing multiple authors who claim that a localised approach is more appropriate since “the politics of race and nation in Canada is simply not the same [as Britain]” (8). Mackey states that “national identity in settler colonies such as Canada has a different landscape and genealogy than identity in the older nations of Europe…” (9). In consideration of the relationship between tourism and voluntourism, I see the association between British and Canadian historical contexts as appropriate to my analysis: as citizens of Empire, Canadians’ first experiences with mass tourism and international volunteering were in the British context. Canada also has strong ties to France’s colonial and political history, particularly in Quebec. A study of French colonial traditions in Canada would be fascinating but is outside of the scope of this thesis. French colonial attitudes are discussed briefly in chapter three in relation to Frantz Fanon and Paul Gauguin. Here France is treated as part of “the West.”
intricate and descriptive written language used in travel writing in the forms of the travelogue, travel journal or diary, and travel journalism. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* lays the groundwork for analysing cultural and political power imbalances in both representation and lived experience. Said focuses mostly on written works by colonial officials based out of England and France working in the Middle East in the nineteenth century. However, his final chapter, “Orientalism Now” (200-328), focuses more on the ways in which “Oriental” is reproduced in Western mass media, the film industry, and educational and political institutions.\(^{13}\)

Other authors focus on the representation of colonised peoples and places by Western nations.\(^{14}\) Throughout his comprehensive study, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse establishes the importance of religious iconography to image formation of non-Europeans from the Middle Ages to the height of colonialism in the nineteenth century. Impressions of African peoples (specifically) as devils, heathens and child-like humanoids were transported back to Europe steadily for centuries. Pieterse points out that while colonial officials came and went, missionaries stayed behind (*White* 68). Missionaries sent images of themselves in Africa back to Europe, depicting themselves as central figures and rendering their African flock marginal or indeed absent (Pieterse, *White* 71). Pieterse points out that gradual secularization in the twentieth century saw the decline of missionary groups from many European countries (*White* 72).\(^{15}\) Secular volunteer organizations, like the ones examined in the study, were founded after the Second World

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\(^{13}\) In Said’s work “Oriental” usually means “Arab” while “Western” usually means “American.”

\(^{14}\) These issues are the topic of chapter three.

\(^{15}\) Pieterse notes the exception of the Netherlands, which was one of the most active mission countries between 1915 and 1940 (*White* 72).
War. I argue that present day promotional images draw on Christian iconography and that conventions used by religious missionary groups of the nineteenth century remain in place.

The history of imaging travel and tourism under a single system of representation is best exemplified by methods used in British colonial travel. Painting and sketching in the “picturesque” style was the conventional Western mode from the eighteenth century onward.16 In An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque, Krista A. Thompson begins her discussion of visual representation in the Caribbean with a lengthy history of the British Empire’s pictorial conventions, focusing on the “cult of the picturesque” (35).17 Thompson’s work centres around early paintings by or for plantation owners, then on later brochure images, postcards and slide shows of Jamaica and the Bahamas in the early nineteenth century that first showcased the idea of the “picturesque” tropical paradise, “tamed, civilized and inhabitable” and populated by “picturesque and orderly” black natives (Thompson 65-67).

In the case of Jamaica, the luscious tropical vistas that were disseminated to Britain and North America were the product of Spanish and British colonial transplantations: indigenous crops were razed and “beneficial” crops (to feed sailors and settlers and for export) were transplanted from other colonial outposts (Thompson 40). In Algeria In and Out of the Frame: Visuality and Cultural Tourism in the Nineteenth Century (in Crouch and Lübbren 41-58), Deborah Cherry also cites the widespread use of the picturesque (which she also calls “pictorialization”) as a way to deny the violence of

16 Most examples stem from Britain and France, whose artistic influences are widespread.
17 The rules of the picturesque were adapted from the painting style of French painter Claude Lorrain: an open, light-filled background; a short and dense foreground that framed the image; water in the midground; and staffage, usually resting, reclining or sleeping.
colonization. Landscapes were depicted only before or after colonialism had taken place, contrasting wilderness against civilized landscapes. Never in touristic imagery is a country shown in the midst of the chaos and trauma of colonization (Cherry 41-45).

In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* Mary Louise Pratt takes up the discussion on representations of the colonies for the “domestic audience of imperialism” (62). Her analysis of Victorian tropes of discovery includes the principle of aestheticization of the landscape as an extension of the “civilising mission.” She asserts that “depicting the civilizing mission as an esthetic [sic] project is a strategy the west has often used for defining others as available for and in need of its benign and beautifying intervention” (201). Pratt argues that linguistic styles that mimicked popular visual idioms (the picturesque, in particular) allowed the reader or viewer to be in a position of both viewer and judge of a scene (a phenomenon she calls the “monarch-of-all-I-survey”) with power to possess and evaluate its contents (200-201).

I argue that only certain landscapes and certain people are chosen for images promoting voluntourism, and that many of those selections follow nineteenth-century colonial patterns.

Nineteenth-century examples demonstrate that a single viewpoint of a scene or an image comes with tremendous power over its contents: the ability to evaluate without threat of response (Baudrillard 169-170) and even the ability to possess its subjects. Since

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18 For further delineation of Victorian tropes of discovery, see Pratt’s article *The Anticolonial Past.*
19 The powerful position of both viewer and judge existed not only in colonial exploration but in popular tourism in Britain as well. So important was the picturesque configuration that tourists used “Claude-glasses,” hand-held convex mirrors on black felt that altered and framed a scene in perfect picturesque formula (Withey 47). Ironically, one had to turn one’s back on the scene to view the image in the glass. This suggests that the captured image of the destination, rather than experiencing the destination itself, was the major focus for late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century tourists. The nineteenth century saw the invention of the modern photographic process, and soon Claude-glasses were replaced with portable cameras.
that time, countless scholars have theorized this same power in visual representation. Because photography is the dominant medium of electronically disseminated visual images, I now focus on the power inherent in the use of a camera and the effects of mass distribution.

**Photography and Mass Media** The allure of photography—a process completed “‘without any aid whatever from the artist’s pencil’”—was the ideal of a “‘natural’” and impersonal image: a simultaneously scientific and artistic record of the landscape (Sontag, *On Photography* 86-88). Concurrent scientific developments, such as Charles Darwin’s publication of *The Origin of Species* and the rise of natural science, promoted positivistic scientific methods of evaluation: you had to see it to believe it. Susan Sontag tracks the history of photography and the camera in *On Photography*, a book that also explores the role of the tourist camera. Sontag writes that touristic photography in the twentieth century was a deliberate act of possession, a way for the tourist or visitor to control an unknown space (*On Photography* 9). The act of capture organizes tourist experience of the destination country in such a way that tourists are able to feel secure about themselves in their new, if temporary, environment. She also writes that the use of the camera is implicitly aggressive in its attempt to capture as much as possible, much more so than painting, which “never had so imperial a scope” (Sontag, *On Photography*

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20 For a wide variety of articles on these topics see *Visual Culture and Tourism*, edited by David Crouch and Nina Lübbren and *Routes* by James Clifford.

21 The negative-positive photographic process was invented by Fox Talbot, an upper-class Englishman who devised the idea while sketching Lake Como in Italy on his own Grand Tour (Sontag 86-88). The connection between photography and tourism was established very early on.

22 Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s *Development Theory* offers a discussion of nineteenth-century science, race theory and evolutionary theory as contributors to the discourse of the British Empire and therefore part of the basis of development theory in the West; see his chapter “Dilemmas of Development Discourse: The Crisis of Developmentalism and the Comparative Method” (19-35). See also Ning Wang’s chapter “The Lure of Images” in *Tourism and Modernity* (155-171) for a discussion of positivism and the Western “commonsense knowledge” that “seeing is believing.”
7). John Tagg echoes her sentiments in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* and positions photography within Michel Foucault’s discussions of the rise of the institution in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century also saw the rise of the tourist guidebook and the popularity of travelogues. This occurred simultaneously with the development of the “new” mode of communication—popular print media—which was defined by the dispersion of “informative statements.” In *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*, Ali Behdad describes these statements as short, “factual” bits of information that were no longer described through the eyes of a particular subject—the writer—but rather were detached points of view to be dispersed and uncritically consumed (43). Behdad offers an examination of the nineteenth century colonial tour from the view of the Easterner, and suggests that guidebooks offer an opportunity for the tourist to engage in a positivistic matching game to determine whether its contents are accurate. Once the phenomenon related in the guidebook is confirmed, the information is collected, stored and later redistributed as “fact” by the tourist thereby helping maintain colonialism’s presence in the area (43-44).

Media images today function similarly to Behdad’s “informative statements.” In many cases, images are decontextualised as means to an end. In *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration*, David Spurr outlines the various tropes or rhetorical modes of representation of once colonies, now “developing countries” in various facets of the Western media. 23 In his discussion of

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23 Several authors cited in this thesis touch on the many rhetorical modes used to represent (once) colonized peoples: see Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes*, for a discussion of aestheticizing practices and *The Anticolonial Past*, for a discussion of the manipulation and mobilisation of reversal, substitution, interruption and digestion in colonial representation; see the entirety of Spurr’s *The Rhetoric of Empire* which outlines twelve historical
the aestheticization of developing countries in the late twentieth century press, Spurr writes that when the “picturesque and the melodramatic are given prominence, they displace the historical dimension, isolating the story as story from the relations of political and economic power that provide a more meaningful context for understanding poverty” (48). In present-day media images, narrative function and socio-political context are denied, leaving only symbolic traces of the issue in question. In Tourism and Modernity: a Sociological Analysis, Ning Wang writes that the embodiment of the “tourist way[s] of seeing” rests on this decontextualisation (among other devices) and tourists are often ignorant of the social context of their destination (161).

Such mediatisation of peoples and places triggers curiosity which, according to Wang, “necessarily entails a second-hand knowledge of something that is curious, and it is this that provokes the desire to see or explore the curious thing in person” (135). The importance of second-hand knowledge is twofold in my view: first, the fact that it is second-hand means that it is necessarily separate from its original source and will be mutable and adaptable based on the perception of the viewer. Secondly, the fact that second-hand knowledge is disseminated by the media (hearsay, photographs, TV programming, and associated imagination among other things [Wang, 135]) means that first hand accounts, what Wang defines as “impressions,” are impossible to create until one has encountered the curious object (135). Wang also suggests that images are partial and simplified and never a complete representation of an object. He writes that the

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24 See Barthes’ discussion on “The linguistic message” (38-41).
combination of visual components is arbitrary and dependent on preference or customs (159). I argue that voluntourism depends on an image’s distance from its original context so it may be recontextualised by various means to suit the mandate of the organization and attract participants.

In Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory, Chris Rojek and John Urry focus more on images of a destination than of the people who populate it. They write that myth and fantasy play a role in the social construction of all travel and tourism sites (53). Most importantly, they describe the importance of contemporary media to the act of tourism: “Because electronically generated images are so pre-eminent in framing our perceptions of territory and history, the tourist generally has little resistance to this version of ‘reality’” (Rojek and Urry 54). Urry (100-102; Lash and Urry 275) defines a new type of postmodern tourism, “post-tourism,” as one that can create the experience of the tourist gaze without needing to leave the home. He suggests that the same experience can be achieved through a camera’s viewfinder and a television set (Lash and Urry 275).

Images are already a part of how people construct their realities and the realities they are soon to face. Preconceptions are part of travel and are vital in the context of voluntourism where the anticipated experience is wholly unlike volunteers’ day to day lives. In Keith Kenney’s anthology Visual Communication Research Designs, David Weintraub’s essay Everything You Wanted to Know but Were Powerless to Ask (198-

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25 Other characteristics of the post-tourist are that s/he enjoys the variety of tourist experiences s/he can choose from; s/he is aware that the tourism experience is fabricated and that nothing is “authentic”; “The post-tourist is ironic and cool, self-conscious and role-distanced” (Lash and Urry 276; Urry 100-102). Some would argue that voluntourism eliminates some of the characteristics of post-tourism and reaches a more “authentic” level of travel through immersion in local culture. I disagree and suggest that its designation as an “alternative” form of tourism highlights the awareness of tourism as a cultural practice. To overlook it as a touristic experience is short-sighted.
argues that images are taking over the work of language as learning or informational tools (198).

**Voluntourism** Alternative forms of tourism such as adventure tourism and ecotourism diversified the tourism market in the latter half of the twentieth century. Ecotourism is the focus of scholarship pertaining to sustainable and environmentally friendly tourism meant to aid a region in its development while not detracting from the natural environment (Ghosh et al. 1; Gunn 24-25). While there is evidence to suggest that ecotourism can be successful in its goal, Ray Ashton suggests that even the best organized ecotour operator can over-develop and replicate conditions of mass tourism (in Ghosh et al. 35).26

Today, tourists to cities such as Mumbai can pay to be shown the euphemistically titled “informal housing” of the capital through organizations such as Reality Tours (Lewin). A similar form of slum tourism was practiced by tourists to Britain and Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Morgan 221-222). Visiting public poorhouses, asylums and hospitals was part of the (usually female) tourist’s itinerary. Today, voluntourism placements often involve public or social health placements in hospitals, child care work in orphanages, medical work in clinics and construction of housing or public buildings in rural villages. Volunteers may be faced with disease and death on a daily basis.27

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26 Voluntourism as I define it in this thesis does include conservation placements. However, the organizations studied also include social, medical and educational placements in their purview and are therefore not ecotour operators. For further discussion of the development of ecotourism, including a portion devoted to ethics and policies see Clare A. Gunn’s *Vacationscape: Developing Tourist Areas* (17-20).

27 More ominous forms of alternative tourism, such as “death tourism” and Holocaust tourism are also available to willing tourists. These are usually educational tours of famous death sites (such as the Book Depository in Dallas from which John F. Kennedy was shot) and in the case of the Holocaust, tours of Auschwitz (see Pollock, *Holocaust Tourism: Being There, Looking Back and the Ethics of Spatial Memory* in Crouch and Lübbren, 175-190: 177). Griselda Pollock admits that these sites have the potential to
In Barbara Heron’s book *Desire for Development: Whiteness, Gender and the Helping Imperative*, a past development worker suggested that her desire to go to Africa was to see refugees, to learn how poor countries work, and to travel. Heron writes that the “political-economic conditions productive of refugees . . . presented as a point of attraction” is “especially troubling” (49). While a slum or a refugee camp is not a famous death site, or what Rojek calls a “sensation sight” (Rojek and Urry 62), tourists choose to pay a fee or to put a hold on employment at home to be there. By choosing to do so, voluntourists indirectly tap into the same sensationalism that makes death, war and poverty into tourist attractions.

Wang suggests that tourism in general “thrives on difference” (137) therefore travelling to destinations similar to one’s own culture and country is a fruitless exercise. He suggests that “modernity’s guilt” has manifested in “Third World” tourism, which may be an unconscious Western drive to alleviate this guilt through “a ritual respect for difference” (140). Wang’s model suggests that the added element of performing “good works” in voluntourism can be considered an extension of the alleviation of guilt and simultaneous respect for difference. However, the point has often been raised by scholars and writers (Birrell) and volunteers in the field that voluntourism’s projects are unsustainable, impractical and often poorly executed. Transient volunteer populations may do more harm than good to the stability of a developing economy.

instruct and preserve certain events and places in histories, but visitors walk a “knife-edge” in so doing (177).

28 Interestingly, VSO (now part of CUSO-VSO) riled against “voluntourism” in the commercial sense as a “new form of colonialism” suggesting that unqualified teenagers had no right to impose their desire to “do good” on developing countries (Birrell). CUSO-VSO is included in this thesis as one of Canada’s most prolific sending organizations.
Voluntourism scholarship is a relatively new field. Critical academic engagement with voluntourism is uncommon (Sin 480) but appears to be gaining momentum. I found one Master’s thesis entitled Canadian University Service Overseas: A Case Study of an Overseas Volunteer Program, by G. Stephen M. Woollcombe produced in 1965 at Pennsylvania State University that compared the foundations and practices of the newly formed CUSO and the US Peace Corps. Woollcombe’s thesis explains that these organizations sprang up in response to criticism of “middle aged foreign advisors” whose standard of living and social practices barely changed when living and working in a developing country (7). Youth were considered “adaptable” and “enthusiastic” and a much better fit for the kind of work previously reserved for older professionals (7).

I also found a PhD thesis entitled Broad horizons? Geographies and pedagogies of the gap year by Kate Simpson, which overlaps with the present thesis on several fronts. She argues that gap year organizations use historical language and imagery to promote their activities in the present day (15), which is the focus of my fourth chapter. However, she devotes only a very small subsection of her paper to discussion of the images used to promote voluntourism and gap years, and acknowledges that the issue of image use in gap year promotion could warrant an entire thesis (Simpson 128).

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29 Interestingly, many of the individuals who have published critiques of international volunteering or similar development work have been participants themselves. Retrospective views are discussed thoroughly in chapter five in consideration of participant interviews.

30 A “gap year” is a British term for a year taken between high school and university to travel, backpack or volunteer in another country. Simpson’s work comprises historical analysis of the foundation and purposes of the gap year; a thorough discussion of the gap year’s relationship to development work and development theory; its relevance to present-day British youth; the connection between youth, travel and tourism (which covers everything from the Grand Tour to Prince William’s own gap year in Chile in 2000); race and class demographics of participants; interviews with participants; the reception of participants by host communities; and a thorough discussion of her own involvement in voluntourism (which she calls volunteer-tourism) as a project leader with an organization called Quest Overseas based in the UK.
One book dedicated exclusively to volunteer tourism entitled *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism* by K. D. Lyons and S. Wearing comprises several essays and case studies. The authors uniformly laud the concrete benefits, positive experiences and values associated with voluntourism and offer little critical analysis. Harngh Luh Sin’s study of volunteers based out of Singapore suggests that the primary motivation for volunteering abroad is a desire to travel, and that interest in social justice issues is secondary (494). Canadian studies include a report by Universalia, E. T. Jackson & Associates and Salassan examining the effects of voluntourism on returned volunteers and their home communities; and a report on national and international volunteerism by Sean Kelley and Robert Case. It was the latter report from which I drew the organizations here studied. CUSO-VSO, CCI, CECI, CESO and CWY also publish annual reports and program evaluations.

I found one study which concerned promotional images’ relationships to volunteer expectations in conservation programs. Alexandra Coghlan concluded that organizations need to be more aware of their perceived images to ensure volunteer tourist satisfaction and the success of their business (267). While Coghlan’s study focuses on images, it does not regard them as a means to knowledge production in the long term but isolates them in the context of customer satisfaction with voluntourism journeys. My

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31 Other books frame voluntourism within fields of international development, tourism and volunteerism and rarely as a subject all its own.
32 Motivation for travel is discussed in the Canadian context in chapter five.
33 For example, in 2006 Canada World Youth and South House Exchange published a report on how well CWY’s programs were functioning.
34 Similar studies focus more on photographic images and their relevance to traditional mass tourism, such as Brian Garrod’s *Exploring Place Perception: A Photo-based Analysis* which examined both residents’ and tourists’ perceptions through photographs of the seaside town of Aberystwyth, Wales. Garrod found that tourists and residents did not differ much in their perception of the town and suggested that this was because the destination image of Aberystwyth as a tourist town was more enduring than its new multifunctional role as a retail centre and university town (396). I discuss role of destination images is chapters three and five.
work proposes that these advertisements, which grow more prolific as voluntourism gains popularity with Canadian youth, contribute to the perception of global cultures and affects participants’ experience of Canadian multicultural society.

The wide range of literature that applies to voluntourism indicates the complications that arise when tourism, development work and conspicuous consumption come together in a single phenomenon. The inattention paid to the intricacies of voluntourism as an industry is worrying. Images produced by a given culture are reflections of its social processes (Chaplin 1; Urry 2) as well as political and economic processes (Pieterse, White 9). Voluntourism’s promotional images suggest that an “us” versus “them” dichotomy is alive and well in the description of racial and cultural difference in the West and abroad. Canada as a Western nation, despite multiculturalism legislation, is complicit in the perpetuation of racial and cultural dualities. The power of widely accessible web-based images to act as informational or teaching tools (incomplete as they are [Wang 159]) or as contributors to the formation of identities and realities in Canada (Littleton x) must not be underestimated. The next chapter establishes voluntourism more firmly as a branch of tourism, introduces Canadian volunteer organizations and outlines the method of my study.

35See James Littleton’s collection *Clash of Identities: Essays on Media, Manipulation and Politics of the Self* for a wide range of views on multiculturalism and the media (specifically the CBC), identity politics and addressing colonial and racist legacies in Canada. Multiculturalism in Canada and its relationship to voluntourism is the subject of chapter six.
Chapter 2: Method and Theoretical Framework

Defining a methodological approach to research is a matter of defining one’s beliefs in the way knowledge can, and should, be produced.

--Kate Simpson (104)

This project is the culmination of my various travel and cross-cultural experiences in a variety of contexts. I have had several encounters with voluntourism: viewing posters on Queen’s University campus; online advertisements; briefly working for a volunteer tourism company as a website copy editor; and participating in voluntourism by way of an internship in Ghana in 2008. While in Ghana, I belonged to a Ghanaian-based public policy NGO with contacts in the Canadian NGO community. I spent the majority of my time managing the institute’s adjacent restaurant and hotel, based on my employment history in customer service, hospitality and the food industry. My task was to help “Westernize” the standard of service at the hotel.\(^1\) My other role was that of a public policy and development intern/sponge, trying to soak up as much information about international and national development and Ghanaian culture as I possibly could. Within a month I was questioning the motives and actions of those around me, from development workers and volunteers to the representatives of international aid agencies whom I met on a weekly basis.

What began as a critical examination of development turned into an interrogation of the touristic impulses of those participating in global development projects. While in Ghana I knew I was complicit in the activities of the North/West in the “developing”

\(^1\) While this was a questionable goal on many levels (even more so in retrospect), to my employer it made a great deal of sense at a business level because of the large number of Western clients (the majority of whom were development workers of varying levels of importance who had been largely dissatisfied with their stay at the hotel). For the sake of anonymity, I will refer to my placement as “the institute” and “the hotel.”
world by virtue of the colour of my skin, my nationality and my presence in Ghana. What I was unaware of, until I returned home and began my research, was that I was complicit in the touristic aspects of international development: the desire to see the world while at the same time “giving something back.” The desire to travel had never been politicized in my personal history, and so I took to researching tourism to educate myself on the things I had already done and how I could become more aware for future travel. It was John Urry who elucidated the wide-reaching aspects of tourism and its gaze which, as a participant, I had yet to fully understand. The paragraphs that follow outline the method of my study. Later, as part of my theoretical framework, I explain how voluntourism is “just another branch of the tourist trade” based on the nine criteria Urry outlines in his introduction to *The Tourist Gaze*.

**Method**

I identified the organizations I use for my visual discourse analysis with a report commissioned by the Canadian government, *The Overseas Experience: A Passport to Improved Volunteerism: A Research Report*, by Sean Kelly and Robert Case. I selected the top five sending organizations based on number of the volunteers sent since 1960. They are, in descending order: CUSO-VSO with over 45,000 volunteers; Canada World Youth (CWY) with more than 33,000; Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO) with 8,400; Canadian Crossroads International (CCI) with over 8,000 and Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI [Centre d’Études et de Coopération Internationale]) with over 4,000.² Almost 100,000 volunteers have been sent overseas by

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² The original report written by Kelly and Case in 2007 lists the following numbers: CWY, 22,000; CUSO, 11,000; CESO, 8,400; CCI, 5,500; CECI, 3,500. New numbers were obtained from organization websites, where available, in June 2011. No new figures could be found for CECI (the website indicated 523
these Canadian organizations since 1960, each of them bringing back images and impressions and participating—directly or indirectly—in the circulation of knowledge about countries outside of Canada.

I documented the photographs and accompanying texts on the selected organizations’ websites. Photographic stills and ignored videos. I chose to focus on the English language versions of the websites because English is both the predominant spoken language in Kingston, Ontario where I conducted my interviews and my first language.

Visual Discourse Analysis Discourse analysis is described by Jan Nederveen Pieterse as a recognized method in the analysis and critique of international development and in the formation of development theory (e.g. post-development thinking) (Development 14). He says the “point” of discourse analysis is to assert that representation matters because it is a form of a social power and therefore a constructor of social realities (Pieterse, Development 14-15). While Pieterse speaks of discourse analysis as a methodology
applied to text, others note its usefulness when applied to picture and text combinations. David Weintraub argues that photograph and text combinations “convey information-knowledge and create a particular version of reality” and as such also form a discourse (198). My goal is to question versions of reality presented by Canadian voluntourism organizations through their visual materials.

To compile these realities I followed all links on the organizations’ websites relevant to potential volunteers (as well as links to pages seeking donations and providing general information) and saved and dated each photograph. I also documented the text surrounding these photographs, which consisted mostly of captions, but also included some main text. I later isolated several relevant visual themes that are consistent between websites. These themes are connected to a long history of the visualization of peoples and places in the contexts of tourism and colonialism. Chapter three comprises a discussion of knowledge production and dissemination and the expression of power relations through visual means. My visual analysis in chapter four is followed by interviews which further connect vision and knowledge production in chapter five.

Urry writes that there is a kind of hermeneutic circle involved in tourism: tourists see promotional photographs prior to departure; they travel to their destination in search of those same scenes; and they return home with their version of the same photographs they saw prior to departure (140). Similarly, Edward Said describes the relationship between the “Orientalist” and “the Orient” as “essentially hermeneutical” (222). “The Orient” was discovered to be “Oriental” not only in the ways expected by nineteenth-

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6 Pieterse suggests that one of the limitations to discourse analysis specifically in the field of international development is that it may overlook actual power relations or activities “on the ground” (Development 15). I suggest that because I am using visual materials which are meant to reflect voluntourism’s activities “on the ground” in a development context, the use of visual discourse analysis is a strong and appropriate choice that runs a lower risk of overlooking “real” power relations.
century Europeans, but also in the ways it could be made to be so (Said 5-6). Finally, Kate Simpson cites Paulo Freire’s notion of the “circle of certainty,” where new experiences are used to reinforce what is already known (214). I suggest that the deliberate search for and careful recording of images for the promotion of voluntourism, as well as personal photographs taken by voluntourists, draw on these concepts. In addition to panoramic beach views and landmarks, voluntourists collect the images of the people and places that are perceived to need their help. The images circulate in their home countries and perpetuate and reinforce the already understood “need” for voluntourism and “development” (see Wang 135).

**Interviews** The interview portion of my study has two main purposes. First, interviews are meant to underscore my visual analysis of the representation of both Canadian and non-Canadian peoples; and second, interviews explore attempts to promote Canadian multiculturalism policy through voluntourism. I solicited interviewees through personal communication with friends and colleagues who have participated in international volunteer placements. Interviews are intended to examine the nature of the relationships between voluntourists and the voluntoured, specifically those that may recycle historical colonial relationships.

I use my visual analysis, volunteer responses, and primary and secondary policy analyses to connect voluntourism practices with popular understandings of multiculturalism in Canadian society. A prerequisite for participation in my interviews was Canadian citizenship as it is vital to connecting portrayals of multiculturalism within the Canadian nation-state with portrayals of multiple cultures in voluntourism. Some of my interview questions ask about the demographics of interviewees’ home communities.
to assess their exposure to cultures different from their own. I propose that despite multicultural legislation and association with the Canadian government, Canadian international volunteer organizations still position the Canadian cultural “centre” as white through their promotional media.

**Theoretical Framework**

John Urry introduces his book *The Tourist Gaze* with a list of criteria defining tourism practices. I connect these definitions with voluntourism practices and suggest that voluntourism is not as divergent from mass tourism as its participants expect. I include my own participation in voluntourism in Ghana to ground these comparisons in concrete examples.

Urry’s first point is simple: “Tourism is a leisure activity which presupposes its opposite, namely regulated and organized work” (2). While many voluntourists contribute to a local labour force (or constitute a labour force themselves on an independent project), it is normally outside of the context of voluntourists’ “day jobs.” Exceptions to this include the organizations CUSO-VSO and CESO, which place experienced professionals or “experts” in volunteer positions in developing nations. While I was not an expert in my field, I was paid an honorarium comparable to (but higher than most) local wages, as well as provided with room and board. As K. D. Lyons and S. Wearing suggest, volunteer tourism as an activity is not limited solely to the “holiday” format (4), thus even if paid work is being undertaken in the destination country, it still falls under the umbrella of voluntourism.

Urry’s second point, that “[t]ourist relationships arise from a movement of people to, and their stay in, various destinations” (3), is fairly self-explanatory. However, Clare
A. Gunn (21-22) and Lynne Withey (ix) make distinctions between “travel” and “tourism”—both of which presuppose a journey, but the former connotes independence while the latter suggest following the beaten path. It could be argued that the decision to undertake a voluntourist holiday is divergent from mass tourism and therefore is described more accurately as “travel.” Kate Simpson argues that in their early days, volunteer-tourism and the gap year were rebellious acts, challenging mainstream trajectories of education and employment (134). In her research, she found that gap year participants made powerful distinctions between the designations of “traveller,” “tourist” and “volunteer.”7 The term “tourist” was described as “derogatory” or “not to be associated with”; one participant expressed a desire to be a “proper traveller” who is described as having more authentic experiences because s/he “join[s] in” (Simpson 178-179). John Frow suggests that such distinctions between “traveller” and “tourist” help to drive the tourism industry. He quotes Jonathan Culler who says that terms such as “traveller” and “tourist” are “are not so much two historical categories as the terms of an opposition integral to tourism” (qtd. in Frow 127). It is possible that many participants of voluntourism oscillate between identifying themselves as volunteers in the sense that they are “doing good,” and as “travellers” who are accessing a more “authentic,” non-touristic cultural experience. Frow argues that this is impossible since this so-called authenticity is only accessible through channels of mass tourism (129).

Urry continues: “The journey and stay are to, and in, sites which are outside the normal places of residence and work . . . There is a clear intention to return ‘home’ within

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7 Interestingly, Simpson and the participants positioned “volunteer” status as separate from both “traveller” and “tourist.” Participants stated that volunteers were expected to be doctors or nurses and be “totally selfless” and “not out to have a good time, they come to help” (Simpson, 176). This speaks further to the contestation of categories in voluntourism, which are briefly discussed in my own interviews with past participants in chapter five.
a relatively short period of time” (3). When speaking of voluntourism generated from the West, destination countries in the developing world are most certainly outside the “normal” for volunteers. I was an experienced traveller when I went to Ghana, but had never been to Africa, a developing country, or even a tropical climate and was therefore keen to experience an extraordinary setting, even if my stay was short term. There a few exceptions to Urry’s point. One important exception is CUSO-VSO which recruits volunteers from within the developing world to run its programs and to act as participants (“About CUSO-VSO”). CWY also places its Canadian volunteers (with their international counterparts) in a Canadian site for three months, followed by an international site for an additional three months, making them the only organization studied that operates bilaterally (“Home”). In these two examples, placement environments would be very similar to volunteers’ home environments. Voluntourism is also found in the non-Western world, for example at the University of Singapore, which has sent delegations of international development students to South Africa (Sin 480).  

Urry’s next point raises a few of the complications with voluntourism: “The places gazed upon are for purposes which are not directly connected with paid work and normally they offer some distinctive contrasts with work (both paid and unpaid)” (3). Some volunteer organizations studied in this paper, specifically CESO (“Resume Guidelines”) and CUSO-VSO (“Am I Qualified?”) require experience or expertise in one’s chosen field as well as a university degree. These organizations place professionals in longer-term positions (usually two years) for a local wage. While in the long run two years is a “relatively short” period of time, volunteers are likely working in a field similar

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8 Future studies could focus on images used on non-Western based voluntourism programs to determine the nature of the visual economy of voluntourism outside of the West.
to their chosen fields at home. However, this usually means a cessation of employment in their home countries and therefore is not connected with their “normal” paid work in terms of salary, though it may be part of their professional development. These criteria suggest that a volunteer can be simultaneously working and touring when volunteering abroad. The added element of “giving back” or “doing good” inherent in volunteering, makes it a unique tourism practice.

Urry’s next point is that “a substantial proportion of the population of modern societies engages in such tourist practices; new socialised forms of provision are developed in order to cope with the mass character of the gaze of tourists…” (3). While I focus on Canadian voluntourism organizations, volunteering abroad is a global activity, though concentrated in North America, Europe and Australia. The range of organizations and products is staggering. These include: Christian relief organizations such as World Vision Canada which offers a short-term volunteer abroad program to those who are willing to commit to the organization long-term (“How to Become a Volunteer”); Base Camp International Centers based out of Kingston, Ontario, which offers two to three month placements in several countries and is open to anyone who applies (“Base Camp International Centers”); the US Peace Corps, which is a United States government agency (“CUSO-VSO vs. the Peace Corps”); or the independent but government-funded organizations such as those examined in this study. My own experience was privately

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9 There are other programs that allow for simultaneous working and touring, for example “Working Holiday” visas available in the UK (“UK Youth Mobility”), or SWAP (Study and Work Abroad Program), which places Canadian youth into short-term positions in different countries in Europe and Asia, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand (“SWAP working holidays”). SWAP’s South African destinations offer voluntary work as an option.

10 The organizations chosen for this study are all affiliated with the Canadian government, specifically the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) which funds them. The only organization does not require that participants hold Canadian citizenship (or landed immigrant status) is CUSO-VSO.
organized by a family member and the head of the institute, who were long-time friends and colleagues. The variety of mandates and volunteer requirements suggests that there is an organization to fit any need, be it short term holiday or a “meaningful” cultural encounter.

The excitement of international travel is reflected in Urry’s next point: “Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered” (3). Previous studies on volunteers’ motivation for participating in voluntourism usually centres on a desire to “do good” in the world, although it is also fuelled by interest in personal and career development (Tiessen and Heron; Kelly and Case 22; Woollcombe 5-6). Independent travel is also a factor as many destination countries are known for their tropical climates and natural attractions. Leisure or vacation time is often included as a component of voluntourism and is often used for exploring the host country. My own anticipation stemmed from an entirely new environment in which to test myself. My visa restrictions only allowed me to travel within Ghana but I did so several times.

Once a voluntourist begins to travel in the area in which they work, the tourist designation becomes twofold. A voluntourist can differentiate “leisure” and “work” time while in the field with a change of scenery. Urry writes, “The tourist gaze is related to features of the landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience. Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary” (3). This applies to the substantial change in scenery between the volunteer’s daily environment at home and the host environment, and to any travels undertaken.

11 Travel within destination countries is discussed in chapter five.
during the placement. The host environment may comprise the “everyday” for the locals, but based on the photographs taken of the destination the marked difference in landscape is a vital part of voluntourist experience. The photographs I took while in Ghana do not differ much from photographs I have taken in other parts of the world: various sites and scenes that were memorable to me, people who I developed relationships with, and of course, things I found unusual. The importance of a distinct and differentiated landscape to the experience of voluntourism is discussed in chapter four.

For the purpose of soliciting further business, the “voluntourist gaze” distinguishes itself from holiday-style snapshots that constitute the tourist gaze. In Urry’s final points I see voluntourism as carving its own niche within the tourism industry. His eighth point asserts that “[t]he gaze is constructed through signs, and tourism involves the collection of signs” (3). While mass tourism has its own well-established signs (for instance a couple kissing in Paris signifies “timeless romantic Paris” (Urry 3), voluntourism operates with a different set of signs and signifiers, ones that tap into the potential voluntourists’ desire to “do good,” while simultaneously tapping into a neo-colonial library of signs that indicate that their “help” is necessary. This library of signs is the subject of chapter four.

Urry concludes with this final point:

An array of tourist professionals develop who attempt to reproduce ever-new objects of the tourist gaze. The objects are located in a complex and changing hierarchy. This depends upon the interplay between, on the one hand, competition between interests involved in the provision of such objects and, on the other hand, changing class, gender, generational distinctions of taste within the potential population of visitors. (3-4)

Here, organizational mandates and demographics of volunteers intersect to create a unique messaging medium and a new object of the voluntourist gaze: the voluntourism
advertisement. The desires and goals of potential volunteers are symbolized in the faces and spaces of promotional images. In my final chapters, these advertisements are discussed as reflections of societal values.

**Function over Form** My analysis focuses largely on voluntourism in Africa for a number of reasons. First, it is where my own experience was gained and my desire to explore the issues surrounding responsible tourism and development stems from that experience. Secondly, Africa is widely considered as in need of the most attention in terms of global aid initiatives as it appears to have the most difficulty in sustaining itself socially and economically (Moyo 3-9). As such, it is the destination for many a voluntourist. Other countries in other developing regions of the world do not seem to merit as much attention in the literature. I am able to generalize views on voluntourism in Africa because this study is not about real distinctions between non-Western cultural groups. This study is about “Westerners” and how Western thought and imaging processes recreate ethnicity, culture, race and class to cater to their own needs. Pieterse reinforces this by saying that image formation of “outsiders” is not based on the characteristics of those outsiders but of the dynamics of one’s own circle (White 29).

It is important to note that the supposed characteristics of the outsider need not be “true.” David Spurr (10-11), Mary Louise Pratt (12) and Tim Youngs (9-10) each suggest that there is no need to separate various genres of writing that present non-Europeans to a European audience. Representations of non-Europeans in the nineteenth century functioned to produce prejudicial and stereotypical views of peoples and places “back home” (in Europe) regardless of the method. Chris Rojek and John Urry agree, stating

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12 However, interviews with past volunteers show that African countries were visited equally as often as countries in South and Central America and Asia.
that “metaphorical, allegorical and false information . . . can be no less important than factual material in the process of indexing” (53). Said writes that in Orientalism representations of the “Orient” and “Orientals” has “less to do with the Orient than it does with “our” world” (12). With electronic images, fact and fiction can be indistinguishable (Littleton x).

Each of these statements speaks to the extreme importance of the function of images, rather than their intended message or their provenance. That being said, sources used in this paper are varied and include the popular media, fiction and literature, academic writings, and personal conversations. If both “true” and “false” information is taken as valid in constructing destinations for tourists; if images are taking over the work of language as learning tools; and if images and their corresponding text are the first source of information for inexperienced tourists or voluntourists, then promotional images need to be examined as cross-cultural learning tools. As of yet there has been little research on these images in the context of voluntourism.

This chapter has shown the validity of treating voluntourism as a branch of tourism for the purposes of this paper, barring the unique contribution voluntourism makes to its own visual economy. The following chapter outlines further the ways in which images contribute to the production of knowledge through processes of classification and aestheticization that remove the need for language.

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13 “Indexing” refers to the “set of visual, textual and symbolic representations to the original object” (Rojek and Urry 53). The authors suggest that “files” of representation exist for particular sites and vary depending on an individual’s culture and exposure to various sources (i.e. novels, television programs, historical data, etc.) (53).
Chapter 3. Seeing and Knowing: Visual Theory

From the very outset, in formal philosophy, thinking has been thought of in terms of seeing.

--Hannah Arendt (qtd. in Rojek and Urry 5)

This chapter elaborates on Western historical and cultural conditions that allow for the construction of a voluntourist sign economy. I begin by establishing the existence of a Western system of classification for non-Western peoples and the use of that system in the production of knowledge. I discuss how this system of classification is translated to the medium of photography, which carries its own scientific weight and is supported by the “common sense” notion that “seeing is believing” (Wang 159). I follow with instances of the ways in which non-Western peoples are subjected to Western framing in modern and colonial era tourism, visual art and literature that have led to the creation of an implicit visual language that communicates this system of classification. Integral to this discussion is the concept of aestheticization as it applies to peoples and places in visual representation, specifically in touristic and press photography. These concepts allow for the construction of a voluntourist economy of signs, which I discuss in the following chapter.

In this chapter I argue that if (as Jonathan Culler suggests) people—tourists especially—are “unsung semioticians” (qtd. in Urry 3), then they are engaging in a kind of qualitative enquiry about different peoples and places and creating knowledge based on those inquiries. Furthermore, tourists and voluntourists support their qualitative conclusions with what they perceive to be quantitative data: photographs.
Classification

David Spurr defines classification as “a rhetorical procedure by which Western writing generates an ideologically charged meaning from its perceptions of non-Western cultures” (62). Classification as a means to knowledge relies on visual information—in the case of the West versus non-West, a visible difference in skin colour, dress, living space—to be deployed. I build on Spurr’s definition and include the formation of images in my discussion.1

Beginning in the eighteenth century, scientific classification acted as the foundation of a new form of European “planetary consciousness” (Pratt 15-36). Taxonomy (the naming and classification of species) was borne of Carl Linné (better known as Linnaeus) a Swedish naturalist in 1735 (Pratt 15-36).2 The act of naming is an extension of the process of conquest and domination (Pieterse, Development 21).3

Anyone familiar with Linnaeus’s system could participate in conquest and reduce aspects of culture and history into natural phenomena (e.g. a German treatise said that the world’s pyramids were “basalt eruptions”) (Pratt 31). Linnaeus himself began applying the system to humans and delineated the first hierarchy of human races (Pratt 32-33).

More famous applications of the natural sciences to humans came in the nineteenth century.4 Spurr traces Charles Darwin’s writings about indigenous peoples he encountered on his journey on the H.M.S Beagle, noting that “Darwin moves from . . .

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1 Spurr’s definition takes the experience of perception—actual sight—for granted.
2 Mary Louise Pratt notes this system of knowledge-building has been applied in a variety of colonial scientific enterprises since the eighteenth century (24-35).
3 Jan Nederveen Pieterse mentions Adam, the first man in the Judeo-Christian tradition; God grants Adam the power to name all of the living creatures on earth (The New Oxford Annotated Bible Gen. 2:19). For examples of naming as conquest in the present day, see Himani Bannerji, Dark Side of the Nation (111) for a discussion on the naming of “visible minorities” in Canada.
4 For further discussion on the “science of race” and various theories of race from the eighteenth century onward see Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s White on Black (45-51).
visible signs and functions to the invisible character of his object” (64). Spurr mentions no sketches, no photographs, and no physical images of the peoples Darwin encountered.\(^5\) Darwin recorded many vivid descriptions of the peoples and cultures he met on his journeys. His description of Fuegans requires no illustration:

stunted in their growth, their hideous faces bedaubed with white paint . . . their red skins filthy & greasy, their hair entangled, their voices discordant, their gesticulation violent and without dignity . . . Viewing such men one can hardly make oneself believe they are fellow creatures placed in the same world. . . . How little can the higher powers of the mind be brought into play: what is there for imagination to paint, for reason to compare, for judgment to decide upon . . . Although essentially the same creature, how little must the mind of one of these beings resemble that of an educated man. (426-428)\(^6\)

Darwin concluded that “if the world was searched, no lower grade of man could be found” (267), firmly establishing Fuegans at the bottom of the hierarchy of human races.

Europeans were highly reliant on rich description via text for their images of indigenous and colonized peoples. Spurr and Mary Louise Pratt both acknowledge that combining genres of journalism or narrative writing, scientific treatises or natural philosophy and travel writing in the same work was common at the height of colonialism (Pratt 29; Spurr 63): simultaneously scientific and ideological designations were easily given to non-Europeans the world over.\(^7\) As technology advanced, illustrations became more legible and accessible, providing an important visual reference for readers. The invention of photography, a scientific wonder in itself, deepened the strength of classificatory systems.

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\(^5\) Charles Darwin’s Beagle Diary edited by R. D. Keynes does include illustrations of Fuegans as well as engravings and watercolours that featured in the first publications of Darwin’s journals (xx).

\(^6\) Darwin supposes that these are the natural thoughts of anyone viewing “one of these poor Savages.” However, continuing, he admits that such thoughts may be erroneous and that there is no reason to suppose the Fuegans do not enjoy “a sufficient share of happiness” (Darwin 428).

\(^7\) Pieterse describes the theory of evolution as “producing an imperial panorama that dehistoricized non-western peoples or, rather, granted them a history only from the perspective of the imperial lighthouse” (White 20).
The notion of “photographic evidence” as indisputable—the idea that the “camera never lies” (Weintraub 204)—can be attributed to scientific rhetoric around the accuracy of photography and the early use of photographs to corroborate the existence of other cultures and to verify the act of travel. Since its inception, the camera has been touted as a tool capable of creating a simultaneously scientific and artistic record. The fact that the light-based negative-positive photographic process can be accomplished “‘without any aid whatever from the artist’s pencil’” (Sontag, On Photography 86) creates an artificial sense of a “natural” image. The scientific power of the camera seems to override the necessity and presence of a subjective photographer.

Susan Sontag said that photography conflates the notions of “beautiful” and “interesting” (“An Interview”). In Cannibal Culture, Deborah Root responds to that thought, noting that “an abstract category of phenomena determined to be exotic or interesting implies the existence of a fictional individual at the center [sic] who adjudicates what will be of interest and to whom” (31). Root notes that this abstraction is not framed as a series of events, “rather, the world appears as something from which a universalized, European “one” selects traits” (31). This is no different from the arbitrary naming of class, genus and species by Linnaeus in the eighteenth century. Pratt suggests that such traits are coded and recorded by Westerners as pregiven customs of non-Westerners. Taken together, these classifications render the “other” culture timeless and unchanging (62).

Travellers run the risk of producing knowledges “that can only ever be, at best, ahistorical and, at worst, exploitative: knowledges inevitably based on superficial appearances” (Simpson 29). Kate Simpson describes tension between the authority
conferred on travellers for having seen and therefore learned through experience, and the characteristic “innocent gaze” of the modern tourist who denies his or her own history and that of the host country for a better holiday experience (29). She writes in the English context, where the majority of countries travelled to for gap years were once English colonies, and argues that when young travellers experience a country without acknowledging their links to their past they “claim powerful knowledge yet are required to take no responsibility” (29). The present day method of sharing knowledges acquired abroad through mass (online) media integrates images as part of the simultaneously authoritative and innocent dichotomy.

The “innocent gaze” becomes less so when the so-called knowledge acquired through that gaze is disseminated to large audiences. Spurr describes the content of a 1984 article for Atlantic Monthly that lists the reasons for Africa’s perceived political and developmental failure, which according to its author is the fault of Africans themselves. Spurr’s analysis reads:

This weakness of African character is not something that is discovered or revealed to a pure, unfettered eye, but rather is determined by the logical order followed by Western observation and by the system of classification that governs the procedures of observation. . . . Yet the emphasis on observable phenomena obscures the way in which such observation is ordered in advance, a misrecognition that allows interpretation to pass for objective truth. (71)

The “pure, unfettered eye” and a truly “innocent” gazer cannot exist. As Spurr states, predetermined modes of observation immediately classifies what is being viewed according to a set of Western rules. As a result, the viewer denies both his/her own subject position and that of the person s/he views (Simpson 29). Westerners who travel abroad can escape a unilateral Western gaze by learning about their country in advance
and by learning from their hosts (see Chapter 6). Otherwise, Western processes of classification invite the mind to transform the world into an object, a process which Martin Heidegger calls “enframing” (qtd. in Spurr 71). Static visions of the world are captured and framed, as photographs are, and remain unchanged in the traveller’s memory.

Photographs, like taxonomic labels, became agents of classification in the nineteenth century when the institution as Michel Foucault describes it became the dominant form of social order in the West. John Tagg conveys the primacy of photography in the ordering and classifying of those considered deviant from societal norms:

A vast and repetitive archive of images is accumulated in which the smallest deviations may be noted, classified and filed. The format hardly varies at all. There are bodies and spaces. The bodies . . . isolated in a shallow, contained space; turned full face and subjected to an unreturnable gaze; illuminated, focused, measured, numbered and named. . . . Each device is the trace of a wordless power, replicated in countless images, whenever the photographer prepares an exposure. . . . The spaces too—uncharted territories, frontier lands, urban ghettos, working-class slums, scenes of a crime—are confronted with the same frontality and measured against an ideal space, a healthy space, a space of unobstructed lines of sight, open to vision and supervision; a desirable space in which bodies will be changed into disease-free, orderly, docile and disciplined subjects . . . (63-64)

Tagg addresses several important points. He emphasizes scientific measurements and the naming and numbering of specimens (in these cases, deviant bodies) as integral to supporting the institution’s claim to authority. He notes that the photographic gaze is unreturnable, which underscores the one-sidedness of scientific research. Photographs are described as acts of wordless power: the photographer possesses knowledge (how to use the camera), technological superiority (the photographer has a camera; the subject does
not), and mastery over the scene (the photographer is the composer; the subject is the moveable object, part of the scenery). There is no question that photographic documentation such as Tagg describes is a visual manifestation of the system of scientific classification as it applies to humans. The spaces Tagg describes, and the tension between classificatory binary poles, are subject to an aestheticization that is built on classification: one that was systematically applied to the spaces of colonialism and the people within them.

**Aestheticization: Concealment or Promotion**

In the spaces of colonialism, visible cultural difference—be it based on race, colour, ethnicity or cultural practice—is either highlighted and positively promoted or concealed and absorbed into the landscape. The following examples range from the nineteenth century to the present day. Aestheticization in image or text allows the creator of the representation to manipulate the scene for his or her purposes. In cases which aim to justify colonial presence, concealment of the local population would suggest to the viewer that colonialism was taking place on “seemingly ‘uninscribed’ land” (Cherry 47) or that the landscape was in need of colonialism’s “benign and beautifying intervention” (Pratt 201). The promotion of difference on the other hand could be used for anything from reinforcing racist stereotypes to titillation, to the justification of colonial civilizing intervention. The tension between celebrating and denying visible cultural difference is discussed at the end of this section and in chapter six.

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8 I use the term “spaces of colonialism” to define areas in which colonial power is exerted. In most cases, this refers to a geographical locations during particular periods of time (e.g. Jamaica in the nineteenth century), but is also used to describe images of colonized spaces (e.g. the image of the *Banana Carrier* [fig. 1]).
Concealment Tourists’ descriptions of Egypt in the nineteenth century reveal instances of concealment or denial of cultural difference between themselves and their hosts. Lynne Withey quotes passages from the travel diaries of Florence Nightingale, who travelled to Egypt prior to her more famous battlefield nursing days. Nightingale wrote, “Egypt to the European is all but uninhabited. The present race no more disturbs this impression than would a race of lizards . . . You would not call them inhabitants, no more do you these” (Withey 245). Another tourist, writing about a young boy she had seen sitting on a rock, wrote that she “longed to petrify him, and take him home, an ebony statue . . . An attitude of such perfect grace must be natural: but not, I suppose, in our climate, or to any one who has sat on chairs” (Withey 245). Dehumanizing Egyptians in this way allowed tourists in the nineteenth century to imagine Egypt only in geographical and spatial terms, rather than as inhabited by active political and social agents (Behdad 46).

Visual analogies to Nightingale’s powerful colonialist sentiment are found in Jamaica. Pictures by a photography studio in Kingston entitled Banana Carrier (fig. 1) Cane Cutters (fig. 2) were distributed throughout Jamaica, North America and Britain. Black workers are shown in and among the sugar cane, hidden by green bananas and jungle vegetation. These photographs were sold as postcards: the workers’ aestheticized labour was thus made into a tourist commodity (Thompson 77). Banana Carrier shows a Jamaican worker with bananas covering his face and the upper half of his body. He is converted into a load-bearing agricultural tool, rather than a recognizable individual.
Figure 1. A. Duperly and Sons. *Banana Carrier*. Postcard 1907-1914. (Thompson Plate 13)\(^9\)

*Cane Cutters* is different in that the faces of the workers are visible and they are posed facing the camera in a group portrait. However, sugar cane dwarfs the workers: the women in the front row are posed bending down towards the shorter stalks so that they do not stand above it. The phrase “cane cutter” is ambiguous and could refer to the tool used to cut sugar cane (machetes) or the people who wield them. In this way, like the banana carrier, they are extensions of the tools of labour and not recognized as individuals.

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\(^9\) Many of the images used in this thesis have more than one title. Figure captions include the original photograph or document title (in italics) where available, followed by any additional title(s) or caption(s) given by the author(s) of the book or website in which the image is published (also in italics). Any title given in quotation marks refers to the title of the website from which the image was obtained. Within my text, original titles will be used wherever possible.
Indigenous labourers are given a cursory mention in Richard Burton’s 1850 description of Lake Tanganyika. Line after line of flowery prose describes the colour and shape of the landscape in intricate detail. Burton adds that the “villages, cultivated lands, and the frequent canoes of the fishermen . . . give something of variety, of movement, of life to the landscape . . . (Pratt 198).” Here the human element of the region is reduced to movement in the scene before him, the objects of human labour (cultivated lands and canoes) demanding the reader’s attention.¹⁰

¹⁰ Similar devices are employed by Darwin in a journal entry on making camp in a remote part of Tierra del Fuego: “Here we pitched our tents & lighted our fires.—nothing could look more romantic than this scene.—the glassy water of the cove & the boats at anchor; the tents supported by the oars & the smoke curling up the wooded valley formed a picture of quiet & retirement” (Darwin 287). Darwin, too, glosses over the human element in the scene (comprised of both sailors and natives) by focusing on the qualities of the objects that occupy it.
By hiding the visible cultural difference of local populations in the landscape, tourists, explorers, and photographers were able to project an image of total control to the “domestic audience of imperialism” (Pratt 62). Supported by scholars like Darwin, these informal agents of the colonial project succeeded in exporting back home images of landscapes ready for European intervention and mastery.

**Promotion** On the other hand, some notable Westerners highlighted and sold the racial and cultural differences they encountered on their travels. Missionaries in Africa may provide the best instances of the promotion of cultural and racial difference by way of creating stark contrasts. Jan Nederveen Pieterse calls missionary image-building “a Manichean double face” with the heathen devil on one hand and the Christian hero on the other (*White* 71). To illustrate this, carefully composed (and in one case doctored) images of missionaries at their work were made and sent back to Europe.

![Figure 3. Suasso de Lima de Prado. *White Father (Society of Cardinal Lavigerie)*. 1955. Image from a Dutch missionary book. (Pieterse, *White* 72).](image)
Figure 4. Pierre Verhoeff. *Sisters of Our Lady of Africa, Biskra (Africa).* (Pieterse, White 73).

In both of the images above the use of white clothing adds to the visual distinction separating the missionaries from their flock. The picture entitled *White Father (Society of Cardinal Lavigerie)* (fig. 3) is a photomontage, the missionary figure superimposed over the large black crowd. Pieterse writes that contrasts in colour, clothing, posture and number “all make the same obvious point” (White 72). So too with the nuns (fig. 4): clothed in white, the upright nuns stand in stark contrast to group of reposed Africans. (I discuss a similar visual arrangement in the following chapter.) The careful use of binary visual cues that single out the white missionaries are meant to reinforce the inferiority of Africans and to encourage Western viewers to elevate the missionaries.

Images as well as individuals were sent back to Europe from the colonies. In 1810 a young Khoi-Khoi woman, Saartje (Sara) Baartman, also known as the Hottentot
Venus, was taken to Britain and France and displayed (both in and out of a cage) as an example of African female sexuality (fig. 5). Images of her naked and decorated body were circulated throughout Europe as cartoons, as scientific documentation and as “examples” of black female sexuality and inherent biological racial inferiority (*The Life and Times of Sara Baartman, “The Hottentot Venus”).

![La Belle Hottentot](image)

**Figure 5. La Belle Hottentot.** Thompson, Krista A. “Human Exhibition: Exhibiting “Others” in the West.” 1998. Web. 17 June 2011. [http://english.emory.edu/Bahri/Exhibition.html](http://english.emory.edu/Bahri/Exhibition.html)

Nineteenth-century French art included many allusions to “exotic” female sexuality. Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) (fig. 6) poses a young white prostitute with a black female servant, a juxtaposition that, according to Pieterse, suggests a similarity in their sexual nature (*White* 182). Paul Gauguin’s late nineteenth century sojourn to Tahiti yielded a world-famous series of paintings of local young women, exemplified here by *Manao Tupaupau* (1892) (fig. 7). These paintings were brought back to Paris and read as informative text on life in Tahiti (Pollock, *Avant-garde* 42). The dark brown, half-naked bodies of these young women were used to represent the vast differences between the
races, classes and cultures of France and Tahiti. Griselda Pollock writes that “the racist version of fetishism makes skin colour a signifier for a culture so that it becomes an ineradicable, physical sign of negative difference” (Avant-garde 44).


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11 Numerous analyses of both Gauguin and Manet’s works suggest that Gauguin derived his inspiration for *Manao Tupapau* from *Olympia* based on similarities in composition and subject matter (see Pieterse [183], Pollock [Avant-garde 42] and Honor and Fleming [720-721; 730-733]) for examples). I have included images of both paintings to illustrate not only the exploitation of the female body and the female body of colour, but also their striking similarities.
Frantz Fanon writes of his own experience on the streets of Paris when a young child pointed out his black skin yelling “Maman! Look! A Negro; I’m scared!” (*Black Skin White Masks* 91). This child understood dark skin as a sign of danger and responded accordingly. Fanon’s chapter, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” (89-119), invites the reader into Fanon’s life as an objectified colonial black body in mid-twentieth-century Paris. In a present day example, Tamari Kitossa describes the ubiquity of the image of “the black man in chains” (i.e. a criminal) or in submission in the Canadian popular media. He argues that this is the predominant form in which the Canadian public is invited to imagine the black body, with the possible exception of as professional athletes (Kitossa).
In most of the above cases, the non-Westerners in question were removed from their home countries (either their physical bodies or images of their bodies). Fanon writes, “as long as the black man remains on his home territory . . . he will not have to experience his life as being for others” (*BSWM* 89). In his view, “being for others” is constituted in relation to the “white man.” Highlighted and decontextualized bodies are imagined in relation to one’s own cultural understanding: in the above cases, in relation to white Western “practical reasoning” (Ball and Smith 19). The absence of knowledge of the culture being viewed recalls Simpson’s “innocent gazer” who is only willing to acknowledge one subject position: his or her own (29).

Western treatment and subsequent connotation of images that depict non-Western cultures is dependant on the pre-existing notion of a binary division between the “West and the rest.” Fanon wrote that “[t]he colonized world is a Manichean world” (*Wretched* 6), which to him meant that a duality of race (e.g. white coloniser and black colonised) is established and maintained through acts of colonialism. Voluntourism’s advertising plays on a binary system of representation which evolved during the height of colonialism. The perceived difference in circumstance between voluntourist and voluntoured is based on a dichotomous structure of superior (West)/inferior (“other”), be it economically, culturally or otherwise, and is reinforced by visible differences in skin colour. This system allows potential voluntourists to classify themselves as “able to give” in response to the perceived need of the voluntoured. While I acknowledge the pitfalls of binary thinking, I believe that in the context of the popular media, images used to promote voluntourism create a space for a real binary opposition between the viewer and the viewed.
The Ends Justify the Means: How Pictures Fuel Voluntourism

Roland Barthes suggests that the power of the photograph as a mode of communication lies in the fact that it is an analogous or continuous image, that is, the event depicted did actually happen. “Certainly,” he says “the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect analogon and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph” (17). Receiving the photographic message occurs on a different level: “second meaning, whose signifier is a certain ‘treatment’ of the image (result of the action of the creator) and whose signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain ‘culture’ of the society receiving the message” (17). He concludes that there are two messages in every image: the denoted message (the event) and the connoted message (what society thinks of it). The code of the connoted system is constituted by “a universal symbolic order . . . in short, by a stock of stereotypes” (17-18). While Barthes’ arguments suggest that photographs have purely denotative status, he hypothesizes that the press photograph is connoted. I take up that hypothesis in this thesis.

Barthes describes the press photograph as “an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms. . . .” (19). Promotional images for voluntourism are often taken by professional photographers hired by an organization, though participant photographs are also used (see Chapter 5). In the following chapter, my notes on composition and, most importantly, the choice of subject matter reflect the carefully selected characteristics of the press photograph. I contend that promotional images for voluntourism combine professional, aesthetic and ideological norms, working from the standards of the tourism industry,
present-day Western cultural aesthetics and notions of “helping” or “doing good” as integral to white bourgeois subjectivity (Heron 7).

Barthes continues to say that “on the other hand, this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is read, connected more or less consciously to a traditional stock of signs” (19). Touristic and colonial visual tropes have been continuously recycled (as is made evident in the next chapter) and so are recognized and readable, sometimes not consciously, for present day Western viewers. The “traditional stock of signs” is one that has, historically, not favoured inhabitants of the developing world.

The reading of a painting, of a newspaper photograph, of a hundred-year-old travelogue invites an incredible range of interpretations. Barthes suggests that, like language, images are read as part of a complex system of meanings and pre-existing signs. He adds that in a situation where image and text are presented simultaneously, “the image no longer illustrates the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image” (19). Kitossa uses the phrase “hegemonic lexicon” to describe the verbal and written treatment of black people in the Canadian media. I extend his conceptualization to suggest that there is a hegemonic visual lexicon, a dominant visual grammar, that applies to the portrayal of non-Westerners, or, more accurately, non-white persons. The visual analyses in the following chapter examine photographs of individuals from and in sixty-three different countries representing countless cultural groups. As I explain, Western rules for representing the non-Westerner do not seem to differ between groups, thus negating any recognition of cultural diversity.
Conclusion

Processes of classification and aestheticization are inextricably linked by the medium of photography. The scientific discourse of the method itself is inescapable, and the mere act of photographing an object instantly renders it aesthetically interesting (if not pleasing).

The initial novelty, expense and privilege of being photographed suffered a change of tone in the nineteenth century with the rise of the public institution. Tagg claims that,

the political axis of representation had been entirely reversed. It was no longer a privilege to be pictured but the burden of a new class of the surveilled . . . [T]he exercise of a new kind of power on the social body, generating new kinds of knowledge and newly refined means of control (59).

Among those persons listed as suffering members of the “new class of the surveilled” are the urban poor and “the colonized races” (Tagg 63-64). It would appear that the “class of the surveilled” has changed little in a post-colonial world. The West has inherited European traditions of photographic representation, adapting them to meet constantly shifting advertising needs. The type of photography used to capture images for voluntourism actively classifies those within them according to this hierarchy and in so doing perpetuates the same antiquated colonial views on race, colour and class. As a preeminent mode of representation in the present-day media, photographs should be looked to as indictors of the present cultural climate (Chaplin 1; Urry 135-156), not necessarily in terms of information or current events but of discourse.12

12 John Urry asserts that the appropriative nature of photography constitutes a power/knowledge relationship (138). David Weintraub emphasizes the power of image-text combinations to construct social realities and reflect or reinforce ideologies (198).
Economist Dambisa Moyo asserts that “[w]e live in a culture of aid. We live in a culture in which those who are better off subscribe—both mentally and financially—to the notion that giving alms to the poor is the right thing to do” (xvii). Apart from official and emergency aid negotiated between developing countries, governments and lending organizations (World Bank, IMF, etc.), a phenomenon known as “glamour aid” (Moyo, 26) or “GlamAid” (O’Manique), which enables high-profile celebrities to engage in high-profile charity work, has taken off in the West.\textsuperscript{13} I see voluntourism as the proletariat version of glamour aid. Participants are part of the culture of aid but instead of giving large sums of money, they see themselves as giving of their time and skills. Simpson agrees, saying that development has become “deprofessionalised” and something for which everyone has relevant skills (41). In any case involvement in aid, be it in giving or receiving it, necessitates certain class divisions.

This chapter has shown the various ways in which people in the colonized, now “developing,” world have been pictured as tools of comparison or as specimens, as cautionary tales, as objects of fear or loathing or titillation, as tokens and as hopeless cases. It has also shown how many of these images have been created solely for the purpose of consumption by the West in tourism, colonialism, fine art and literature. Present-day promotional photographs evoke nineteenth-century colonial examples by aestheticizing and classifying the people within them, rendering their images separate from their original context. The following chapter discusses how divisions and difference are represented visually through signs.

\textsuperscript{13} It is generally accepted that glamour aid began with Bob Geldoff’s “LiveAid” concert in 1985 and is manifested today in various celebrity (Moyo 26) and consumer initiatives (O’Manique) to alleviate poverty in the developing world.
Volunteer-tourism has allowed for the gap year to access, if not to create, its own economic market through marketing a language of ‘purpose’.

--Kate Simpson (55)

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of photographs collected from the websites of five Canadian international volunteer organizations: CUSO-VSO, CWY, CECI, CCI, and CESO. While the programs advertised by these organizations are diverse in their objectives, target populations, volunteer demographics, program fees and requirements, their photographic advertising is strikingly similar. I look at how people living in destination countries are pictured compared to Westerners, and how they are re-presented for and through Western eyes. I have identified five thematic categories which I believe describe the most salient and widespread images associated with voluntourism: non-Western landscapes; visible cultural adaptation; compositional imbalances; visible technology; and a unique usage of women and children. These categories house the signs that form the visual economy of voluntourism. I close with a discussion of the function of this visual economy: the perpetuation of colonial discourse in the West’s relationships with the developing world.

“Over There”: Non-Western Landscapes

Geography and topography become important markers of contrast in promotional photographs of voluntourism. John Urry notes that the distinction between the tourist’s home environment and the destination country is vital to the experience of tourism (3). Visualizations of the tourist gaze provide a reminder not only of a journey one has taken,
but of the contrast between the environments and living spaces of the West and the non-West.

Photographs taken of volunteers pre- or post-placement are usually taken indoors in an office setting or convention centre in Canada (figs. 8, 9). I found a single photograph of Canadian volunteers outdoors at a reorientation session upon their return to Canada (fig. 10).

While there are cases of similar photos taken in destination countries, the majority of photographs of volunteers when they are abroad are set outdoors, where geographic differences are more visible. Desert landscapes (fig. 11); regional housing styles, such as mud-and-thatch huts and roundhouses (fig. 12); and tropical vegetation (fig. 13) are prominent features.

Direct oppositions between indoors and outdoors, tropical and temperate, recall Deborah Cherry’s note that throughout history “wild” colonial spaces have been contrasted with the “civilized” metropole (41-58). Many of the countries in which voluntourism operates are tropical zones: on or near the Equator. When viewing promotional images that focus on landscape, one must consider the long tradition of imaging tropical zones for consumption, a process known as “tropicalization.” Krista A. Thompson defines the term as “the complex visual systems through which the [Caribbean] islands were imaged for tourist consumption and the social and political implications of these representations on actual physical space on the islands and their inhabitants” (5).1 This process served to highlight the supposed superiority of the European race, climate and civilization (Arnold 6).

As a tool in voluntourism, tropicalization may help to reinforce certain “place-images” based on ideals and expectations (Thompson 5).2 Voluntourism’s promotional images play on the paradox of tropical representation, viewed on the one hand as paradisiacal and, on the other, impoverished and pestilential (Arnold 7). David Arnold states that in from the eighteenth century onward, the tropics were constructed as places where nature dominated the human presence (7). This theme is still being expressed in tropical regions of the world today, and is shown in the image below (fig. 13).

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1 While Thompson writes specifically of Jamaica and the Bahamas, tropicalization is a process that has been identified under different names by other scholars; see Ali Behdad on Edward Said’s Orientalism, and David Arnold’s “Illusory Riches”: Representations of the Tropical World, 1840-1950.”

2 A “place-image” is a commonly-held set of representations of a particular place (Thompson 5). “Place-image” is referred to as “destination image” by other theorists such as Kye-Sung Chon, Ning Wang and Clare A. Gunn, specifically in relation to tourism (in Thompson 5).
CECI’s web page describing its financial partners is illustrated with an image of a worker dwarfed by the rice paddy in which s/he works. In its panoramic view of lush green hills, neatly divided from the rice paddy by a straight line of palms it is a picturesque composition. At the same time, the composition also establishes a strong tension between, on the one hand, untamed or unconquerable wilderness, which can be seen in the distance, in the lush green palm trees and vegetation, and in the dwarfed size of the worker in an expansive landscape, and on the other hand, controlled and “developed” landscape, which is visible in the precise diagonal and horizontal divisions of the cultivated land in the foreground.

Arnold also writes that at the height of colonialism the tropics were viewed as constitutive of human character and experience in these regions (7), an idea also known as “geographic determinism” (Moyo 26). Compare the image of the worker in the rice paddy (fig. 13) with the image of a volunteer from CWY’s “InterAction” program web page (fig. 14). The volunteer, who is in the foreground just left of centre, holds potted tropical plants. In the earlier image, the worker in the rice paddy is dwarfed by the
expansive landscape of the field in which s/he is working. S/he is dependent on the availability of the landscape and its resources. The volunteer on the other hand fills much more of the frame, and is obviously the focus of the image, while the village is a backdrop. The viewer can assume that the volunteer will be planting those plants in the near future. Both the worker in the rice paddy and the volunteer are working to transform the landscape in the direction of “development.”


Consider the picture, Cane Cutters, (Chapter 3, fig. 2) in comparison to three pictures that appear on the websites of volunteer organizations: CWY’s picture of African women selling produce at a market, which it uses in connection with that part of its website devoted to “Destinations, Dates and Costs” (fig. 15); a picture on the CCI website of a person processing grain, which it uses to illustrate the demands of the world’s poor (fig. 16); and a CECI photograph of young women sorting fruit on the ground (fig. 17), which highlights “Local Development.” Unlike Cane Cutters, the dynamism of these images prevents the locals from being fully absorbed into the
landscape. Showing labour in progress can also function to inform potential volunteers of the nature of “work” in destination countries. Nevertheless, the people in these images are still tied to the landscape because their labour is dependent on the success of the crops with which they work.

Marked contrasts between “here” (voluntourists’ home regions) and “there” (non-Western destinations) encourage the viewer to make a connection between foreign landscapes and foreign problems. Deborah Root writes that “an aestheticized taste for societies far removed from where we actually are can become a way of never having to put the assumptions of our own culture into question . . . The Westerner remains in charge. . . ” (21). Any focus on traditional lifeways that does not require the use of “modern” machinery also reinforces this divide. Non-Westerners are seldom if ever
shown using computers, cell phones or heavy machinery. More frequent are canoes, mortars and pestles, and bicycles.

In addition, local people in the destination country are most frequently pictured outdoors (see figs. 15-17). Laura Briggs draws attention to this in her discussion of international adoption in the United States during the Cold War. She writes that part of the “us-them” divide was visualized in terms of the home: the ideal American family was pictured in a “home-like interior,” while the “displaced and ‘foreign’ children were outdoors” (189). Signs of the voluntourist visual economy oppose Western/Northern signs: a palm tree is contrasted with a pine tree, a mud building with a brick building, outdoors with indoors. This builds on binary structures of representation that are ingrained in Western thinking and reinforces dimensions of difference.

Whereas in early photographs and images of the colonized world local people were absorbed into the background (Pratt 198; Pieterse 67; Thompson 77) in contemporary images of voluntourism, people are the focus of the images. People who are perceived as “in need,” combined with their presence in front of a distinctly non-Western distant landscape, support the notion of geographical determinism, the idea that a country’s wealth or success depends on its geographical environment (Moyo 26). In this way the tropicalization of destination countries in voluntourism generates business interest and justifies the presence of development-oriented organizations.

Visible Cultural Adaptation

Images of volunteers “in the field” need to be visually distinct from the images of volunteers in their day-to-day Western lives in Canada to contrast the practices of voluntourism with the everyday. To make this distinction, such photographs provide
information on location and lifestyle changes by portraying the volunteers in local dress (figs. 18, 19), and often engaging in a traditional local activity, such as preparing meals (figs. 20, 21).


I call these outward displays “visible cultural adaptation.” Volunteers are expected to eventually return to their homes in the West and resume their previous lives. During their temporary residence abroad, which can be anywhere from two weeks to two years, a certain degree of acculturation to the host country is expected and in some cases, explicitly required by the organization. This expectation can be conveyed in a photograph by showing an adaptation in clothing style and physical activity of volunteers currently in the field.

CCI and CWY advertise their programs with pictures of white volunteers depicted in local dress. In an image representing the “Crossroaders and Friends” four white women and one white man pose with a black woman: all but one (white woman, second from the left) wear African-style fabrics somewhere on their bodies (fig. 18). The presence of these fabrics (rare in the West), combined with the tropical vegetation in the background, suggest that this photograph was taken somewhere in Africa (likely West Africa, based on the style of the fabrics and CCI’s organizational profile). The white volunteers in these images are effectively using their clothing as an indicator of their geographical location and cultural milieu (evidenced by the somewhat tokenized black woman who, interestingly, only wears African fabric as an accessory and not on any major articles of clothing).

In the second image, CWY’s *Traditional Prayer Ceremony in Bali* (fig. 19), two white female volunteers are dressed like the women around them, observing the same ritual. The volunteers do not look at the camera and may not actually be able to see it.

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3 CUSO-VSO requires that participants learn the basics of a/the local language; CWY and CCI require that participants live with a host family.
CWY’s photograph is different from CCI’s in that it depicts the performance of a local religious rite combined with the display of local clothing, which according to some suggests a greater depth of cultural adaption.\(^4\) In either case, outward displays of non-Western cultural artefacts and practices attempt to indicate a degree of change in the behaviour or lifestyle of volunteers.

Kate Simpson argues that volunteer tourism creates spaces for volunteers to experiment with their identity in a globalized context. She writes that the visible transgression of identities, historically and currently, is achieved through a change in clothing. She suggests that not only does adopting local dress ease movement through local culture and society, it also allows travellers to temporarily adopt a new cultural identity without having to commit to actual change (58).\(^5\) I agree with Simpson, but add that the documentation of new cultural identities (in the form of photographs or wearable souvenirs) is important to volunteers and add to their cultural capital upon returning to their home countries.\(^6\)

Of course many of the images under analysis do not show volunteers in local clothing. What they always show is a smile: a visibly happy volunteer among locals.

\(^4\) While attending an intercultural training workshop ("Understanding") at Queen’s University International Centre, an image of a group of white women and Nepali women, all in Nepali dress, was shown as an example of cultural adaptation. One workshop participant responded to it by addressing the superficiality of clothing as cultural symbol: the fact that the white women were in Nepali dress actually meant nothing as regards their cultural adaptation. She continued to say that had the women been shown attending a ceremony or at prayer in the local custom, the depth of those gestures might suggest a more genuine adaptation. I disagree and suggest that one need not be committed to a religion to perform its rites, just as one need not be committed to a particular style of dress to wear it temporarily. See Kate Simpson’s analysis of the transgression of identity in the following paragraph.

\(^5\) Scott Lash and John Urry discuss a similar point in their theory of post-tourism, where the world of the post-tourist is “literally and figuratively a stage” (275).

\(^6\) The value of a change in clothing to a “native” style is dependent on the notion that something about the host culture’s style of dress is significantly different from Western clothing. This is not to suggest that locals always wear what could be called “native” dress. In my personal experience, this is not the case. For example, Ghanaians where I was living participated in “Traditional Fridays,” at which time the Western-style clothing that was favoured most of the week was exchanged for “traditional” dress.
These smiles may mask the nature of the experience. Many travellers suffer from culture shock: a feature of voluntourism that has no visual representation. In her article for the university newspaper, the *McGill Daily*, Lisa Miatello writes that students’ confessions of culture shock while on international internships are particularly “grating.” She writes,

> What, exactly, is shocking? That you’re a white Westerner who’s either being viewed with suspicion or disturbingly revered? That the “real deal” defies your omniscience by failing to line up with your course packs? That you, in fact, don’t understand the language, the peoples, the politics, or the history of the region in question? That your “help” is not needed? (Miatello)⁷

While this is a rather vitriolic assessment of some of the realities faced by volunteers, Miatello adeptly identifies the differences between the “real deal” to, in this case, information provided in advance by International Development Studies course packs. In other cases in which volunteers register for overseas projects through an independent organization, their first encounter with a destination country is through the promotional literature or websites: the photographs and their corresponding captions and texts. Alexandra Coghlan’s study of promotional images of conservation-based volunteer tourism suggests that the messages sent by volunteer organizations and those received by potential voluntourists are not the same (17). Perceived messages varied among volunteers in her study. She concludes that a mismatch in expectation and experience based on promotional material can lead to dissatisfaction and therefore lower motivation and commitment from volunteers (20). The effects of “expectancy disconfirmation”

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⁷ Miatello implies in her article that only white people volunteer abroad. My own data and personal experience show this not to be true, but it is important to note this assumption as an indicator of how voluntourism exists in public consciousness. How volunteers imagine their fellow volunteers and how they are represented will be explored further in chapter five.
(Coghlan 2) in the field at the time of the study were unknown, but are explored in the next chapter through volunteer interviews. A recent ongoing study by Rebecca Tiessen and Barbara Heron entitled “Creating Global Citizens,” focuses on young Canadians’ experiences abroad as volunteers, students and interns. One aspect of the study focuses on experiences (or lack thereof) of culture shock. Tiessen and Heron report that many travellers suggested that they did not experience culture “shock” but rather a difficult period of adjustment. The popular “W-curve” model of culture shock is used to reflect the many ups and downs experienced while on placement. Part of the W-curve model—the central peak—is “superficial adaptation.” Tiessen and Heron suggest that because volunteers are “in the field” for such a short amount of time (usually 3-6 months), they are not able to complete the entire W-curve and therefore do not experience the whole cycle of culture shock. Instead, superficial adaptation becomes the peak of their experience: surface adjustment is what is brought back home, rather than a deep understanding and ability to adapt completely to a new culture. This stage is what is documented by voluntourists in the field and sold to potential voluntourists.

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8 Coghlan said her future studies would examine volunteers’ experiences on the ground to see the effects of the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm and to determine how those experiences affect the volunteer tourism industry (21). I suggest that in expectation-experience mismatch situations, the result is culture shock: an unwillingness or difficulty in adapting to local culture and current circumstance.
9 Other aspects of “Creating Global Citizens” focus on motivation for travel and how staff at the destination placement regards volunteers from the West, including their perception of culture shock in volunteers. This study was discussed during Tiessen and Heron’s lecture “The Problem with Culture Shock: Canadian Youth Experience and Host Community Reflections” at Queen’s University.
10 Tiessen and Heron had hoped to find a Canadian sample travelling for the first time. They could not. All participants had some experience with international travel, many in the areas in which they were volunteering/studying/interning. They also found their median age to be 28, rather than much younger, as they had expected. They reminded the audience of the importance of remembering that this study examines a sample of self-identified volunteers, interns and students and is therefore incomplete (Tiessen and Heron).
An Issue of Balance

The fact that most of the organizations’ photographs focus on the volunteer is unsurprising: volunteers need to know what the experience of volunteering abroad might be like. What is surprising is that many of these images also include large groups of non-Western locals who receive only cursory acknowledgment at best. Such dismissal is strange for organizations whose mandates ride on such words as “partnership,” “exchange,” and “cooperation.” While looking at websites and reading about tourism and voluntourism, I found many visual forms of the phrase “the West and the rest.” The composition of these photographs positions a single white volunteer against a much larger group of non-white locals.

The first image (fig. 22) is a photograph of a group in CWY’s InterAction program—a single white male, kneeling on red earth, surrounded by twelve black men and women and jungle foliage. There is no caption to indicate where or when the photograph was taken. CESO uses a photograph entitled Friendly Amerindian staff from the mission (fig. 23) to describe “what we do.” A large white male volunteer sits at the bottom right of the frame; to his left are seven brown men and women in matching red uniforms. All are giving the camera the thumbs-up. Another photograph (fig. 24) depicts a meeting about microfinance in Burkina Faso. A white man and a black man stand in a grove of trees, addressing a large audience of black women. Behind them is a whiteboard. In a CUSO-VSO photograph, bearing the caption “Life-Changing Stories” (fig. 25) a

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11 The major exception to this statement is CUSO-VSO, which on several pages on its site asserts the participation and value of local stakeholders in development initiatives. The organization notes that many of their volunteers are recruited from developing countries with VSO programs (“About CUSO-VSO”). It also acknowledges that volunteering is “not a panacea to poverty—but [they] think it can be an important part of the solution.” Language used on the website also places agency in the hands of the local beneficiaries as well as the volunteers, and photographs are comparatively less focused on the work of the Western volunteer and more on cooperative relationships.
white male volunteer stands middle-ground left, waving his hands in the air. He is surrounded by many small black children, one mimicking his actions in the foreground. The web page title indicates that this picture was taken in Cameroon.


Figure 26. Cover of *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism* by K. D. Lyons and S. Wearing
In all of the images, white individuals are positioned slightly off-centre, creating a visual imbalance on the vertical axis that draws the viewer’s attention. In Friendly Amerindian staff from the mission and “Life Changing Stories,” the white figures rise above several non-white figures, creating an eye-catching imbalance on the horizontal plane. Colour distinctions favour the white volunteer who in each image is the most identifiable person of a different colour. One final image (fig. 26) is particularly telling: it is the cover image of a book cited in this thesis that exemplifies the power imbalances present in voluntourism. In it, a single, white female figure in trousers and a t-shirt has the attention of eight Asian men in golden-yellow robes. They are in a classroom and the men’s desks are arranged in a semi-circle facing the woman, not each other. The woman is central in the composition and faces the viewer, anchoring the viewer’s eye to her image. The imbalanced composition of these photographs appears deliberate: the eye is drawn to the odd-one-out—the volunteer—through use of colour and the arrangement of figures.

Edward Said notes that after 1950, depictions of Arabs that were displayed in Western countries always showed them as large, faceless multitudes. This compositional structure obliterates “the Oriental” as a human being (Said 27). In voluntourism’s images, the individuality of local people is not a focus and members of the host culture are subsumed into a visually organized “they.” The corollary to this is the highlighted Western volunteer, usually white (or at least of a different colour than the locals) who becomes the focus of the composition by virtue of the high contrast. Patricia Noxolo has
argued that whiteness is privileged in development discourse (Simpson, 42). Evidently, whiteness is privileged in development’s visual discourse as well. There is a clear division between the space of volunteer and the space of the local. In that space is the “knowledge” and/or “skills” that are being “shared” or “transferred” by voluntourists to voluntoured. Positions of power are clear.

Privileging whiteness leads me to another important question about representation in voluntourism: the presence of non-white, Western volunteers. A study of returned volunteers commissioned by CIDA in 2005 (Universalia, E. T. Jackson & Associates & Salassan) suggests that overseas volunteers are “‘grassroots ambassadors’ for Canada and in their ethnic, cultural, linguistic gender and age group mix they are a true reflection of the new multicultural society Canada has become” (3). However, I had difficulty identifying this “mix” on the websites of Canadian voluntourism organizations. Navigating the photographs on these organizations’ websites, I found myself, without much effort, identifying all white people as “volunteers.” In images of groups where no white people were present (which were few) I struggled to identify the volunteer versus the local. Captions became valuable sources of further information (although not all websites provided them). I equated “whiteness” with “foreignness” within the photographic spaces of voluntourism. When I came across an image that blurred those categories, I was unable to distinguish between groups.

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12 Simpson specifically cites international volunteering (along with tourism and the gap year) as an activity that operates in a racialized context and echoes colonial relationships (42). Simpson acknowledges that she does not explore this idea in her dissertation, nor has anyone discussed the gap year and international volunteering in a racialized context.

13 Simpson also raises this issue as a question of (mis)representation in gap year advertisements but does not address it further (132). An exception to this rule is CUSO-VSO which shows a non-white volunteer in Canada at a fundraising event (fig. 8).
I was disappointed in my readiness to make distinctions between volunteer and local based on race, but within the discourse of voluntourism few other identifying features are offered. John Urry notes that in tourism, “if there are any non-white faces in the photographs it is presumed that they are the ‘exotic natives’ being gazed upon” (142). The historical tradition of exoticized images of non-white persons has trained the tourist eye to very neatly divide the boundaries of tourist and toured using the colour line. Not only has the tourist never been represented as a person of colour, the role of “helper” has seldom been a visual designation for non-white persons in Western discourse.\textsuperscript{14}

Such visual training carries on into the viewing of voluntourist advertisements which, in the case of Canadian organizations, have the potential to both undermine and underscore any perceived relationship between travel and race. A clear visual distinction can be made between white Canadian voluntourists and supposed “exotic natives.” However, the Canadian multicultural context has the potential to undermine this relationship by documenting the presence of non-white Canadian volunteers. The racial distinction between groups may be blurred by these representations and new identifying characteristics can evolve. The politics of race in voluntourism, as well as demographics of volunteer populations, is addressed in chapter five.

**Visible Technology**

A common experience for Western volunteers in rural, impoverished non-Western countries is the attention they draw based on their possession of digital cameras. When

\textsuperscript{14} In a recent symposium at Queen’s University, a professor in the Department of History discussed what he saw as the unpreparedness of Queen’s students (the majority of which are white, middle class, and from Ontario) to accept a black man in a position of intellectual authority because students have little to no experience with “three dimensional black people” (Walker). I would argue that a similar conceptualization explains the tourism and voluntourism industry’s positioning of black people as locals, never as tourists, and as recipients, rarely as volunteers.
travelling in Ghana, I used a disposable one. The common request from locals was “Snap me!” meaning, “Take my picture!” When I explained to a pair of men in the market that I could not show them the image afterwards, their excitement dimmed but their interest did not, and they posed for the picture anyway (fig. 27).

![Figure 27. Men in Tamale Central Market. Personal photograph by author. October 2008.](image)

In Ghana, I often witnessed the excitement of young children when one of the volunteers I knew brought out his or her camera and “snapped” them, showing them their own image afterward. I found images of these phenomena on three of the five websites I studied. CUSO-VSO invites visitors to its media centre web page with an image of a white woman showing a video camera to a group of brown men and children (fig. 28). She stands in the lower right foreground, her head bent down over the camera to show three young boys its features. CWY’s Picture 36 shows a group of people clustered around a digital camera (fig. 29). A white woman crouches in the lower right hand
corner, while a seated black woman holds a digital camera. The women’s attention is on the photographer, while the black man in the image (holding a portable CD player) leans down to look at the screen of the digital camera. Both of these images feature broad smiles.


On the cover of CESO’s Annual Report for 2009-2010, the attention of a group of locals is on a white woman and her digital camera (fig. 30). She stands in the centre of a group of five black men and women in what appears to be a village setting, with laundry hanging on a clothesline in the background. Each person in this image is smiling, and all but the white woman in the centre is looking at her digital camera’s screen display. Focus on the camera as an object invests it with power—the power to capture attention as well as the power to capture an image. The woman as the owner of this camera is by extension powerful.15 This image also follows the compositional imbalance mentioned earlier (“An

15 Mary Louise Pratt writes about the stories of Mungo Park, a Scottish explorer who uncharacteristically governed his relationships with Africans through a system of reciprocity, rather than exploitation. He relates the Africans’ fascination with his body and his clothing, making Park “seen” rather than the “seer” throughout his tales (72-83). In the case of the current photograph, the woman is simultaneously seen (by the people) and seer (by way of the camera).
Issue of Balance”). The woman’s head rises above the group as they look downward towards her camera. Her smile, the use of her camera and her body are central to the image.

Affordable digital cameras have democratised the ability to capture mass amounts of visual data, to which anyone who participates in online social media can attest.\(^{16}\) Thompson writes of the power of the global image in an anecdote about a trip to Jamaica in 2000. She was heavily criticized by locals for taking an image of a costumed donkey. They said she would circulate it upon her return home and suggest to the world that Jamaicans were living in a past time (Thompson 2-3). Whether or not someone objects or agrees to his or her photograph being taken by a volunteer, s/he has no control over its subsequent distribution.

Ownership of a camera can denote status on a number of levels. First, it indicates a certain benchmark of material wealth. While digital cameras are much more affordable today than in previous years, they still represent a purchase outside of basic needs (which in many destination countries are not met). Second, as Thompson discovered, cameras are markers of identity. As Urry puts it, the person standing with a camera around his or her neck is undeniably a “tourist” (139). In the slightly more complicated world of voluntourism, where stays are longer and more involved, the camera can denote and perpetuate “outsider” status. Thirdly, the camera can stand as a cultural symbol. Susan Sontag wrote that only certain societies engage in voracious picture-taking on holiday, citing specifically Americans, Germans and Japanese (Sontag 10). Because “photography

\(^{16}\) Online social media also allows for the widespread distribution of visual data and photographs, without a publisher’s approval, without editing, and without censure.
“gives shape to travel,” groups which are most embroiled in visual culture are most likely to pursue a holiday organized by photographic “obligations” (Urry 139).

Intangible technologies or knowledges are present in many of the photographs as well. White doctors, white contractors and white teachers are shown performing their arts, healing, building and teaching those who seemingly cannot do it themselves. For example, CUSO-VSO illustrates its global health initiatives with Katrien Deschamps (fig. 31), a photograph of a white woman wearing a stethoscope holding an X-ray film. She stands between two black men whose attention is also focused on the film. She points to something on the X-ray; the man’s hand is mid-air, pointing to the same spot. The man’s mid-air movement, combined with the woman’s intent expression and her firmly-placed finger, suggests that the man is being shown how to indentify some aspect of this X-ray film. White volunteers instruct non-white locals.


Perhaps a more emphatic depiction of instruction is provided by a CESO photograph showing a volunteer providing training at an inn in Guyana (fig. 32). A white
man stands at the right of the photograph, looking down a black woman in a black suit who is balancing two plates in her left hand. The white man holds his right hand over his left in gesture similar to the woman’s. A black man in a chef’s jacket sits at the table on the lower left. The group is standing outdoors on a background of tropical plans and white latticework. When considered with the caption, the volunteer appears to be instructing the woman in formal restaurant service.


A final CESO image shows a group of men staring down into a concrete structure (fig. 33). A white man points downwards into the structure with his left hand. Four brown men appear to be following his gesture. The men are dressed for work in jeans, shirts and baseball caps. A pick-up truck rests on the grass and gravel road behind them. Here, the element of instruction is made clear in the caption and accompanying text. The white man is a water treatment expert from Ontario, sent to Honduras to help revive a derelict water treatment plant ("Clean Water in Honduras").
The transmission of technological or technical knowledge is part of many organizations’ mandates, particularly CUSO-VSO and CESO which are generally served by highly trained professionals on long-term assignment. Jean Baudrillard writes that knowledge and technique are part of the system of goods exchange in capitalist culture and are always, and will always be, produced and reproduced by “the system” (87). Voluntourists are presented by organizations to the host community as “experts” regardless of their actual expertise in an area (Simpson 51). J. Hutnyk writes that this articulation of power is “particularly evident in third world tourisms which, by their nature function through, and within, significant inequalities of power” (Simpson 51). These inequalities are manifest in voluntourism’s promotional images.

The Madonnas of Voluntourism

Much of today’s development work and most international charitable initiatives focus on the role of women as valuable members of society and contributors to economic
growth. Nevertheless, images of women in domestic roles are prominent on volunteer websites and in many cases a white female voluntourist is filling that role. Barbara Heron writes of white women’s internalized onus to “do good” as “a way of performing appropriate bourgeois femininity” (154). In a globalized world, the expectation is that one can do “more” in a place where material needs are most pronounced (for examples see Simpson 211; Chapter 5). Heron argues that Westerners/Northerners, women especially, are “produced to respond to such a discourse [of “helping”]” by various media campaigns that highlight the plight of children in the developing world (Tiessen and Heron).

The image of a white volunteer with a crowd of non-white children is a common image in popular consciousness of voluntourism. Miatello’s opinion piece on International Development Studies internships at McGill University is accompanied by a hand-drawn sketch of a young white woman with several black children (fig. 34). The author fumes about students’ misguided attempts to “make life better for all the starving babies of colour in remote (and distant) places” (Miatello). Similar images surface on all of the organization websites I studied, with the single exception of CESO’s site. Posed fully frontal, smiling young white women are shown with at least one but as many as ten non-white (usually black) children. These images evoke two iconic Christian figures: the Madonna and Child (fig. 35) and the Madonna of Mercy (traditionally known as the Madonna della Misericordia) (fig. 39).

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17 See for example CCI’s mandate on women’s rights initiatives (“Promoting Women’s Rights”) and the Millennium Development Goals (“Millennium Development Goals”).
18 R. Lewis writes that images of women may serve a symbolic function in the transmission of volunteer-related values and ideals, for instance charity and caring (qtd. in Cherry 53).
19 Renée Cox’s photographic series, Flipping the Script, addresses the idea that whites have ownership over the images of prominent Christian figures, particularly Jesus Christ. In Yo Mama’s Last Supper (2001) she places herself, a naked black woman, in Christ’s position at the Last Supper, surrounded by black disciples. The New York City Roman Catholic community was outraged at her “anti-Catholic” art. This suggests that while much of the West is secularized, religious imagery is still well known in its traditional forms (Croft).

Below are three images of the voluntourism Madonna and Child. The first image, from CUSO-VSO’s “Donor Rights” page, depicts a smiling white woman embracing a small black boy (fig. 36). They stand on the dusty ground in the courtyard of a collection of brightly-coloured buildings. While there is another black woman in the background (right), the care of the boy is left to the female volunteer. The second image—another depiction of CWY’s InterAction program—offers a close-up of another smiling white woman (fig. 37). This time, the three black boys that surround her do not smile, but they do focus their attention on the camera.

Figure 37. "International Phase." Web. 7 October 2010.  

Figure 38. "Donate Today: Create a Legacy: Your Gift Can Change the World."  

20 Note that the URL provided is for a different version of this image currently on CWY’s website (21 August 2011): the October 2010 version is no longer in use.
The most pertinent image of the Madonna of Voluntourism is from CCI’s page detailing how to make a bequest to CCI (fig. 38). In it, the volunteer is white, fair-haired and blue-eyed, wearing crisp white clothing. The child she carries is black, with dark hair and eyes, wearing African cloth. The oppositions continue: she is a grown woman, he a little boy. Both gaze directly at the viewer as they embrace each other, similar to Mary and Jesus in Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* (fig. 35). CWY and CCI’s images (figs. 37, 38) show female volunteers with more than one child, which suggests that these voluntourism Madonnas are “good” enough to protect and care for more than one child at a time.

Laura Briggs writes that photojournalism dealing with poverty and hunger has become standardised, relying on “two images to stand for the abstraction of ‘need,’ the mother-with-child, and the imploring waif” (180).21 Briggs’ analysis of the Madonna and child centres on the “Third World” woman of colour or the migrant mother with her child(ren). In voluntourism, the natural mother is replaced with a temporary white mother-figure, sent to protect the child.22 A very important difference between the “development” Madonna (Briggs 181) and child and the “voluntourism” Madonna and child is that in the latter, the women are almost always smiling.

Similarly protective, but with a greater number of charges, is the Madonna della Misericordia, an oversized Virgin who, in traditional depictions, protects faithful Christians under her cloak (fig. 39). A similar relationship between the protectress and the protected in the photographic spaces of voluntourism is found in compositions

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21 Briggs gives a long list of other possible images that could be used to represent “Third World” hunger or poverty, many of which are included as images of voluntourism: “international aid agencies with buildings, trucks and personnel; development projects . . .; . . .children playing games; people sleeping; elderly people; white people . . .; men . . .” (1).

22 Karen Dubinsky quotes historian Vijay Prashad “‘The people of the colonies cannot save themselves,’ he writes ‘so they must be saved’” (17).
involving grown women and young children. CWY uses *Students from Oakville’s Trafalgar High School* (fig. 40), a photograph of four white teenage girls posing with seven brown children to illustrate their Global Learner program. Three of the four girls stand up or bend down to the same level as the children. The young woman in the pink shirt, slightly right of centre, has her arms outstretched around several children. She, like the Madonna, stands above those surrounding her.

CECI provides another clear expression of the protective roles young women can play as voluntourists: a smiling young white woman stands behind a row of five black boys (fig. 41). In the background is a brick structure and feet of other people are visible. The painting *Misericordia Altarpiece* (fig. 39) and the photographs illustrating CWY’s “Global Learners” and CECI’s “Volunteer Programs” have a similar triangular structures, with the head of the Madonna/volunteer forming the apex and a row of people—children—in the foreground forming the base of the triangle.


The final image, another of the “Life-Changing Stories” told through CUSO-VSO, has a slightly different structure than the CWY and CECI’s pictures; however, it expresses the sentiments of protection and affection more clearly (fig. 42). Again, a single, smiling white woman is the focus of this image: she sits at the centre of the frame, surrounded by nine black children. Three of the children sit on her lap while the others stand, all with their eyes fixed on the photographer. They sit in an interior with an open wall to the brightly lit outdoors. None of the children is smiling.

The volunteers in CWY’s and CECI’s images are clearly divided from the children surrounding them on the horizontal plane. As I discuss earlier (“An Issue of Balance”), they stand above the children, drawing the viewer’s eye upward. The children seem to
gather around the volunteers, particularly in CUSO-VSO’s photograph, just as the faithful gather around the protective Madonna della Misericordia. Madonna imagery evokes notions of purity, ideal womanhood (which includes motherhood) and sacrifice. While much of the Western world today is secularized, it is evident in the images above that such feminine virtues have not been forgotten. Voluntourism’s visual “language of ‘purpose’” (Simpson 55) appeals directly to those aching to uphold traditional Western notions of femininity.

The image of the white female volunteer does not function as “Madonna” without children. Along with the draw of particular locations, voluntourists “tend to populate a children’s geography” by volunteering at schools and orphanages (Simpson 55). Karen Dubinsky writes of the use of the “symbolic child” in Western public consciousness in the twentieth century. She explains that childhood as we know it today is an invention of the West and implicates NGOs in spreading this idea around the world (16). Dubinsky writes,

This ideal of a safe, happy, protected childhood is a product of the social concerns and priorities of the capitalist countries of Europe and North America. Innocence is the reigning ideology of modern childhood. We expect, promote, and defend childhood innocence on all fronts: sexual, economic, legal and political. (15-16)

Images of starving and homeless children were used in the Cold War to signify the need for US interventionism, consisting of “moral adoption,” including transracial adoption of “unadoptable” children into the homes of white North Americans (Briggs 190; Dubinsky 23

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23 A counterargument to this in tourism comes from Ning Wang who suggests that the process of feminization is vital to the transformation of reality into suitable tourist images. To avoid the shock of the unknown, tourist brochures use images of women to represent the destination. When males are pictured, they are children, elderly or demasculinized waiters and bartenders (165). Young local men are pictured in voluntourism, usually in a state of inaction, but are used nowhere near as often as images of women (volunteers and locals both).
Briggs credits UNICEF with the normalisation of the mother/Madonna and child and the “waif” as the “grammar of ‘hunger’ or ‘need’” (192-3). Briggs’ own example of a starving black mother and child during a famine in Ethiopia is reproduced here (fig. 43). *Ethiopian Woman* highlights the naked, wasted body of a child in the arms of a woman. She stares into the distance to the left, standing in a blurry field of people, most of whom are women and children.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 43.** Photographer title: *Ethiopian Woman-AP Photo, Ethiopia, April 2000.* (Briggs 180).

Both Dubinsky (19) and Briggs (180) suggest the use of the Madonna and child or the starving waif shift focus to notions of “rescue” rather than addressing the social and political causes of poverty. This detachment creates a sign—as Briggs puts it a “visual

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24 “Moral adoption” is the forerunner of today’s popular child sponsorship programs (such as World Vision) where money is sent to an organization in a developing country (in Briggs’ article, an orphanage in post-World War II Japan) and used for raising an individual child. Briggs’ mention of “unadoptable” children includes children of mixed race (specifically “Amerasian” and white/African-American). Dubinsky’s list of unadoptable children includes mixed race groups as well as children with physical or intellectual disabilities.
idiom of ‘development’’ (195)—decontextualising the event in the photograph and allowing for greater flexibility in interpretation. In keeping with Briggs and Dubinsky, Jan Nederveen Pieterse argues that victim imagery causes “reverse empowerment,” empowering the Western donor instead of the African recipient (White 209).

What Simpson terms “images of development” consist of “the while adult” with “the black child” (130). She argues that colonial era descriptions of Africa and Africans as “child-like” in comparison to the British adult legitimized ongoing colonial relations (130). CECI aligns its “vision and values” with an image that recalls some of these sentiments (fig. 44). Four non-white children (whose backgrounds are not explained) smile broadly for the camera, dressed for school. They carry backpacks and wear uniforms, which signify that they are receiving a formal education. Their smiles suggest that they are pleased by this. The underlying message is that a Western-style education—a cornerstone for many Western-based development initiatives and voluntourism programs—leads to happiness and ultimately, an acceptable level of “development.”

25 Canada’s history is echoed in this image. First Nations, Inuit and Métis children were forced into residential schools from 1831 to the 1970s (Castellano et al. 2). These schools denied Aboriginal peoples their languages, spirituality and culture and forced their children European Christian moulds of religion, manner and dress, often through acts of physical, mental and spiritual violence. The children in “Vision and Values” have a reason to smile which, as with other images in voluntourism, distinguishes them from their colonial-era predecessors. The final chapter of this thesis addresses continuities between the government of Canada’s dealings with Aboriginal peoples and the recipients of voluntourism.
Simpson also adds that when children are pictured alone, the “malnourished child” (Briggs’ “imploring waif” [180]) has been replaced by the “smiling happy” child, which demonstrates, she argues, “an evolution, though not a revolution, in imagery” (130). CUSO-VSO uses a happy but seemingly imploring child on a web page requesting donations (fig. 45). A young black boy tilts his head to the right, head angled slightly downward, his eyes looking up to the camera. He wears a white collared shirt and is indoors, likely in a classroom. Another smiling, happy child is CUSO-VSO’s choice of illustration on its “Apply Online” web page (fig. 46). A young brown girl smiles for the camera, her head tilted slightly to the right and downward and eyes looking up, similar to the boy in the previous photograph. Two more smiling children in the background frame her face, along with another child whose mouth is not visible. While these children do not appear to be starving, their gaze suggests an invitation to donate or to participate in CUSO-VSO’s programming and, by extension, “development.”

Figure 46. "Volunteer: Apply Online." Web. 4 October 2010. http://www.cuso-vso.org/volunteer/apply-online/.
Voluntourism has been accused of being neo-colonial in nature, disguised by good intentions (Simpson 122-123, 133, 202). Recycling Christian icons as secularized versions (in a world in which many still observe traditional Christian customs and recognize its imagery) smacks of an unwillingness to abandon colonial power relationships with the developing world.

**Discussion**

Rhian Richards uses semiotic analysis to describe messages sent through British charity advertisements in the latter half of the twentieth century. He asked questions regarding the content of a photograph—the signifier—followed by the connoted meaning of that image—the sign. For example, an image of a single person from a “Third World” country with no surrounding community members suggests that “all people in the Third World are isolated and unsupported by their communities” (Richards 5). The connoted meanings were transmitted via newspaper advertisements to the British public which, despite the institution of guidelines regulating the content of charity ads, still cannot perceive the “Third World” as anything other than a place that is in desperate need of help (Richards 15).

The target demographic in the cases of voluntourism here studied is usually young people, between 18 and 30, who have been raised in a more media-based and technology-rich culture than their older volunteer counterparts. Richards suggests that the different responses between his university student focus group and his pensioner (senior citizen) 26 In Coghlan’s study nearly half of her participants fell into the 25 to 29 year age group (7) but the age range for Canadian organizations is more varied. CUSO-VSO and CESO require more job experience to participate and as a result, participants are often much older. In this study, CESO, the organization with the strictest entry requirements (more than ten years experience in one’s field) uses the least number of photographs. While these organizations have an upper age limit of 80, it is still mostly young people who participate.
focus group was exposure to different kinds of advertising based on the eras in which the respective groups were viewing the advertisements (15). One pensioner responded that the “camera doesn’t lie” (14). Such a statement may indicate that older demographics in the West subscribe to the myth of the authority of photography (see Chapter 3). Interviews in the following chapter suggest that past participants of voluntourism, all aged between nineteen and twenty-eight, do not share this belief.27

Richards’ study describes photos that depict particularly negative conditions, such as war and famine. Voluntourist photographs have very few, if any images with distinctly negative denotations with the exception of visible poverty. Given that Richards’ study and my own focus on the same geographical areas and populations at around the same period of time, the distinguishing factor between charity ads and voluntourism’s promotional media seems to be the element of tourism for pleasure. Locations must be attractive to the participant in some way, either through making the physical location visually appealing or by creating visual representations of the moral, emotional, or personal benefits of the program.

Voluntourism is heavily dependent on collecting, creating and disseminating images for the purpose of providing evidence of need, while at the same time attracting visitors to a destination. Voluntourism visually produces a culture of “need” and “aid;” of poverty; of hope; and of “development” as the ultimate goal. The images produced by these organizations eventually become scripted, as if from a file photo. John Tagg describes photography as providing institutions with a “central technique” for the framing of power-knowledge (64). Tagg echoes Sontag when he describes each exposure as an act

27 Volunteers recognize that photographs are fabricated but aren’t always able to articulate colonial remnants (see Chapter 5, “Comments on Visual Literacy”).
of “wordless power, replicated in countless images” (63). Both authors highlight the element of control that exists when viewing a person or a space through a camera lens. I argue that because the “central technique” of Western institutions emphasizes the importance of order, health, wealth and civilisation (see Tagg 62-63), the necessary corollary is that photographs displaying these qualities’ binary opposites—chaos, illness, poverty and savagery—can be and are used to represent the non-West. However, voluntourism merely adapts these dire circumstances by inserting white volunteers into the image to show the viewer that help has indeed arrived.

Heron advocates for drawing attention to the cultural discourse leftover from the colonial era that produces such a need to “help” in the “developing world.” She suggests that Westerners are “produced to respond to such a discourse” (Tiessen and Heron). She asserts that truth-claims, colonial construction of the “other” and notions of Western subjectivity opposed to imaginings of the global South helps bolster the imbalanced system of power. Most importantly, she argues that the power of this discourse enables people to find the places they expected to see. This thought evokes Urry’s hermeneutic circle of tourism (140), Said’s assessment of Orientalism as productive of Orientalism (5-6), and Paolo Freire’s “circle of certainty”, wherein tourists travel to places they have already seen to take pictures to match (Simpson 214). So too with voluntourism: young people travel to and experience the version of the global south that is supported by Western discourse. Heron closes with a call to “excavate [the] colonial continuities” found in volunteer/study/intern abroad programs and to change the lens with which Westerners see the world (Tiessen and Heron).
By describing the themes above, I have shown that images used in promotional materials in the present day are deeply rooted in colonial, imperial and Christian imagery. Continued use of peoples and places in the developing world as depictions of “development,” “poverty” and “hope” renders their images as solely symbolic. A similar effect is had on Westerners, with the image of white volunteers standing for “civilization,” “technology” or “help.” The next chapter explores former volunteers’ level of awareness of such themes as they view them and move within them as specifically Canadian participants of voluntourism.
Chapter 5. In the Contact Zone: Volunteer Interviews

The following chapter is a brief analysis of interviews with those who have seen through voluntourist eyes. I use interviews first to determine the nature of volunteers’ experiences in spaces created by voluntourism. Interviewees were asked to recall various images: those they had of their destination country prior to travel, those they had seen in voluntourism advertisements and those they had collected themselves. Interviews created space for dialogue about issues that many volunteers are not able to discuss when they return home (particularly negative experiences such as trauma, culture shock or ethical objections to projects undertaken). Many of these issues relate to the images propagated through voluntourist advertisements and are discussed at length below. The final purpose of the interviews was to determine what, if any, experience volunteers have with multiculturalism in Canada. In the next chapter I explore the connections between travelling in and among multiple cultures abroad and living in and among multiple cultures within Canada.

Participant demographics

Interview questions followed a general script which I adapted to each volunteer as the interview progressed. Some interviewees volunteered intimate information about how their trip affected them (emotionally, mentally, professionally etc.) while others were not able to articulate any major personal changes. Only some of the volunteers were able to recount significant details and events related to preparations for their trip. Future studies should include participants who have yet to travel so as to better identify their relationships to the promotional images and events they experience. Changes were made
to interview questions depending on participants’ responses (see Appendix I for both the original and final scripts), but their general tone remained unchanged.

I conducted interviews with twelve volunteers, all female.¹ All volunteers were either current university students (at both graduate and undergraduate levels) or held at least one university degree. Eight of the volunteers had degree concentrations in global or international development studies which may account for a heightened awareness or reflexivity regarding their experiences volunteering abroad.² All interviewees are Canadian citizens of various backgrounds. As I discuss in this chapter, many volunteers addressed “whiteness” in the spaces of voluntourism, mostly within the context of their own experiences (though not all volunteers were white). Volunteers were never asked about their backgrounds except whether or not they were Canadian citizens. Information provided by volunteers about their racial or cultural identities is used in the current chapter: in these cases volunteers’ pseudonyms are omitted to honour our confidentiality agreement. Placement projects varied among volunteers but most were social or health services placements.³ Volunteers are identified by their destination country and any references to cities, organizations or other identifying characteristics are omitted.

¹ Personal emails soliciting participants were sent to at least fifty of my friends and colleagues. A poster campaign across Queen’s University main campus resulted in only one participant. Many interviews were cancelled due to scheduling conflicts. Two of the respondents who cancelled were male. Statistics suggest that women constitute a small majority of international volunteers (Kelly and Case 8), so my sample is not as representative as I would have liked it to be.
² One volunteer contested the definition of the term “voluntourism” as it is presented in this thesis and suggested that her experience did not fit in with my definition because of the rigorous recruitment process employed by the organization through which she worked. I argued that, regardless of the depth of the program on the ground, the same visual tools are applied, and that is where my concern lies.
³ One volunteer did conservation work, another information technology training, and another documentary film and image-making. Otherwise all were health, education and social or community service placements.
Contact Zones

Mary Louise Pratt describes contact zones as places where “subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point[s] at which their trajectories now intersect” (Pratt 8). Pratt emphasizes the importance of the term “contact,” and how it “treats the relations among . . . travelers and “travelees,” not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interactions, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 8). Personal trajectories begin to intersect in the planning stages of voluntourism, while volunteers are gathering information and preparing for travel. The following section examines volunteers’ experiences in contact zones: those created in imaginary spaces prior to departure, as well as those created in the field. This chapter also introduces the concept of the contact zone as an everyday aspect of contemporary Canadian society.

I argue that voluntourism’s promotional images are created and consumed as contact zones: through images and text, potential voluntourists are co-present with their host countries’ cultures and peoples from perspective of their home countries. All volunteers underwent orientation or training, if not prior to departure, then in their destination countries before the commencement of their placements. These sessions involved booklets, role-playing, and cultural education lectures, sometimes by citizens of the host country. By introducing the host culture to voluntourists on an imaginary plane during the orientation phase of voluntourism, power, in the form of authoritative knowledge, is given to voluntourists. On the other hand, those living in the destination country—the voluntoured—may not have similar access to information about voluntourists’ cultures. Ning Wang defines the perception of a destination prior to travel
as an “image” based on secondary knowledge. Post-travel, perception of a destination becomes an “impression” based on first-hand experience (135). Contact zones and their necessary asymmetrical power relations exist at both the “image” and “impression” stages of voluntourism.

Pratt notes that contact zones may involve “conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict” (8). When asked about such conditions in photographs, one volunteer offered a picture of herself participating in what she perceived as an aggressive relationship with a local person. Phrases such as “pulling on your heartstrings” (Volunteer Thailand) and “exploitation” (Volunteer Philippines-South Africa) were used to describe some promotional photographs (particularly ones using children), suggesting that the asymmetrical power relations of contact zones can be communicated in images. Expressions of annoyance at stock photographs (Volunteer South America-India; Volunteer Thailand) or frustration that the advertising did not portray the experience (Volunteer Ghana) suggest that the experience of life in contact zones is masked by superficial photographic versions (see Wang 159). Kye-Sung Chon argues that “an image is the net result of the interaction of a person’s beliefs, ideas, feelings, expectations and impressions about an object” (qtd. in Wang 159). The remainder of this chapter explores how volunteers form images of their destination and how they relate to them before, during and after their journeys abroad.

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4 Volunteer El Salvador showed me a photograph of herself with her hands on her hips, towering over and looking down at a local woman. She described the situation as listening to the woman talk about her microcredit organization, but expressed concern looking back at the image. She felt she looked aggressive and worried that perhaps that was part of her attitude toward Salvadorans in general, regardless of her affection for the community in which she had been living and working for ten years. The image is not included here as part of our confidentiality agreement.
Destination image formation

Surprisingly, most volunteers had a difficult time recalling specific photographs that led them to investigate voluntourism.⁵ Some volunteers were shown no images in promotional materials or by their organization during their training phases (Volunteer East Africa; Volunteer South America-India). However, all volunteers, regardless of their exposure to images from specific organizations, were able to articulate and reproduce the same types of images used by all volunteer abroad organizations.⁶ Wang argues that an image presupposes an audience and is therefore a social construction that is “intersubjectively or publicly held” (159). It appears that signs and symbols used in voluntourism are widespread and accessible even by those who are not direct participants of a given organization.

The lack of memory for specific images may be attributed to Clare A. Gunn’s destination image formation theory which posits that information about a destination is gained not only through promotional material but also through information gained from other sources, such as friends and family and mass media (Coghlan 268-269; Wang 135; Gunn 37).⁷

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⁵ Connections between photographs and a desire participate in voluntourism were implied later when we discussed advertising methods of voluntourism: most volunteers then said something that connected with previous statements about their own experience in the field. For example, Volunteer Philippines-South Africa was able to connect with an image of a “liberal, educated hippie who’s doing something” on a poster for volunteering abroad and expressed a desire to be in her position.

⁶ Volunteers offered their photographs to me with the understanding that I would not reproduce them in this thesis. Volunteer East Africa permitted me to reproduce one of her personal photographs (fig. 47) with the understanding that I edit the image to protect her identity and those in the photograph with her. I did so, and the image appears below.

⁷ Gunn (37-38) and Wang (135-6) both argue that there are phases of image-formation: phase one, the “organic image” of a destination is formed via non-commercial, non-touristic sources such as mass media, education and word-of-mouth. Several volunteers mentioned that their first experiences with their destination countries (and the idea of volunteering abroad) came through teachers (Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana), family and friends (Volunteer Thailand, Volunteer Costa Rica, Volunteer Ghana 2, Volunteer Guyana), or church or community groups (Volunteer Philippines-South Africa, Volunteer East Africa, Volunteer El Salvador). In phase two, the “induced image” is formed by investigating commercial sources.
During the pre-travel stage, part of destination image formation in voluntourism is positioning oneself as a “Westerner,” “Canadian” or “volunteer” within the confines of the voluntourism experience. When asked about their expectations of their roles in destination countries, volunteers’ answers varied considerably. Volunteer Ghana thought she “would come in there and be a miracle worker . . . able to come in and do tons of stuff right at the beginning.” Volunteer East Africa thought she would be in a “helping role . . . and be the mother for . . . orphan children.” Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana thought of herself as a guest in both countries, as did Volunteer Thailand who was expecting to learn new things and gain “a degree of personal growth.” Volunteer Ghana 2 and Volunteer Ghana 3 both had specific technical projects and mandates waiting for them in Ghana, so speculation on their roles was minimal. The remainder of the volunteers had no real expectations or understanding of what their role would be upon arrival at their placement.

Volunteers were asked about their favourite images from their time abroad, which were usually those they took themselves. In a few cases, some of those images were redistributed as fundraising or recruitment aids for various projects and organizations.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) The redistribution of travel experiences for the purpose of securing future participation is achieved through various means. All of the websites studied in this thesis include pages of volunteer testimonials. These pages act as a forum for the representation of a one-sided personal narrative, usually a combination of photo and text that outlines the cultural and social sides of the voluntourism experience, such as CCI’s “Who We Are: Crossroaders in the Field”. This particular organization requires that its volunteers document their experiences with volunteering: “While overseas you will be asked to document your work and experiences with stories and photographs for consumption back home. These include stories for the media and for use on CCI’s website” (“What You Need to Know: While Overseas: Raise your Voice”). I too have participated in what is called “public engagement”: in my work with Queen’s University International Centre (QUIC) as a Country Representative for England (where I lived and studied for two years) I spoke at study abroad sessions for prospective exchange students describing my experiences with English culture, I also wrote a short travelogue series about my time in Ghana. Pratt argues that personal narratives set up “the initial positionings of the subjects of the ethnographic text: the ethnographer, the native, and the reader” (“Fieldwork” 32). In the case of voluntourist testimonials this triangulation
The following section elaborates on the visual economy of voluntourism as outlined in the previous chapter and focuses on how volunteers experience the photographs used to promote voluntourism; the lived realities communicated by those photographs; and how they chose to record their time abroad.

“Over There”: Capturing Non-Western Landscapes

Volunteers expressed desires for a contrast to, or for difference defined against, their home life when describing their motivation for travel. Interestingly, promotional images featured little in our discussions. Only Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana mentions promotional images in a way that emphasizes landscape and a desire to be in an exotic location:

A lot of pictures were of our counterparts. It kind of just looked like a fun experience. They were all happy and smiling in the photos [of] exotic destinations. You know, some of them were on beaches with palm trees with bright blue water behind them and some were in the mountains. . . .

Some volunteers had mental images of where they were heading based on previous visual experience. Volunteer Ghana said she “was picturing [a] more ‘typical vision of Africa,’ you know when the lions are lounging over there. . . .” Some volunteers sought novel experiences (Volunteer El Salvador; Volunteer Thailand). Volunteer Thailand explained,

I was really looking to go someplace that was totally different, so I didn’t want to go to Australia or New Zealand; it just wasn’t what I was looking for . . . I was happy with Thailand. What I wanted was some place completely different; some place I’d never been before, a brand new world to go into to just sort of immerse myself in and that’s what attracted me to Thailand as opposed to the other places. I guess the other places didn’t seem far enough for me, in terms of culture and in terms of other aspects beyond geographical distance.
Volunteer Thailand expresses a clear desire to go somewhere very different from Canada. John Urry notes that “the tourist gaze is directed to features of the landscape or townscape which separate them off from everyday experience” (3). The distinction between home and away is desirable among volunteers and seems to increase in value as a function of distance. A love of travel was often cited as the reason for engaging in voluntourism (Volunteer Guyana, Volunteer Ghana 3 and Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana). As motivation, this differs little from traditional holiday patterns (Sin 488). It would appear that, initially, the concept of cultural or geographical distance and difference were the primary motivators for volunteering abroad.

Volunteers’ personal photographs from their stays abroad focus on landscape and scenery: volcanoes (Volunteer El Salvador); a unique fig tree (Volunteer Costa Rica); rivers (Volunteer Guyana); and the ocean and sunsets (Volunteer India). I state in chapter four that images of non-Western landscapes are formed in direct opposition to Western features, e.g. palm tree versus pine tree. Tzevetan Todorov argues that Western descriptions of the exotic are in fact projections of Western “escape attempts” based on features observed at home (qtd. in Wang 139). By documenting physical differences in the landscape, participants of voluntourism are working to create the most visually distinct experience possible, firmly rooting the voluntourism experience within a mass tourism paradigm.

This phenomenon is not unique to Western-based voluntourism programs. Harngh Luh Sin conducted a study at the University of Singapore which saw volunteers wishing to “get away from Singapore” or “further away from Asia” (488). Volunteers in this study were sent to South Africa. It is unclear how or if promotional media factor into Sin’s analysis and how the landscapes of Asia and Africa would be opposed to sustain the image of geographic difference.
Visible Cultural Adaptation?

In the previous chapter, I discuss images of Western volunteers in local dress, engaging in local custom, and eating local food as ways of making visible their adaptation to host cultures. I addressed the issue of adaptation in my interviews by asking volunteers not what visible or physical changes they made to better fit into their respective host culture, but whether they experienced “culture shock.” The purpose of this question was to explore the possibility of discrepancies between happy, acculturated volunteers and the realities of adjusting to life in another culture. My questions were met with answers similar to Rebecca Tiessen and Barbara Heron’s study: most volunteers admitted to a difficult period of adjustment, and not culture “shock” as such.\textsuperscript{10} Tiessen and Heron argue that participants return to Canada halfway through the cycle of culture shock, at the “superficial adaptation” stage. When asked about this phenomenon, Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana (a ten-month volunteer) replied,

\begin{quote}
I just feel like it took me three months just to get finally comfortable in the country. Like you go through this initial period where you’re going through culture shock and finally you’re kind of comfortable there and then you’re leaving . . . I would say three months definitely isn’t long enough [to adapt].
\end{quote}

While Tiessen and Heron state that three months is not long enough to experience genuine forms of culture shock, Volunteer Uruguay Ghana suggests that a form of it exists in the early stages of the voluntourism experience. Promotional photographs capture program participants during their short-term stays and project these images back to potential volunteers. These photographs give the appearance of successful, visible cultural adaptation when volunteer testimony suggests otherwise.

\textsuperscript{10} Volunteer El Salvador noted that it “wasn’t so much culture shock as culture ‘huh?’” a milder and more intriguing form of the affliction. Many of the volunteers interviewed stated that they were experienced travellers who knew how to deal with culture shock when it arose.
Volunteers’ confessions of culture shock were greater when discussing their return to Canada. Volunteer India said that she could not enter a shopping mall for a year; she was so appalled at “our materialism.” Volunteer Ghana 2 noted that in her city “everyone has blinders on [and they] don’t really care about talking to other people or getting to know other people” as they do in Ghana. Many volunteers suggested that the value in volunteering abroad is in a greater appreciation for the things we have in Canada, such as running water (Volunteer Guyana) or basic facilities such as hospitals (Volunteer India). I argue in chapter four (“Visible Cultural Adaptation”) that voluntourism’s promotional media project the appearance of acculturation to the host culture, rather than reflect real acculturation. However, volunteers’ rejection of Canadian lifestyles upon their return to Canada suggests that perhaps the adjustment to life in the host country is not as superficial as images permit one to believe. It must be said that volunteers eventually readjust to their Canadian lifestyle. As Volunteer Ghana put it, “you become entitled again.”

An Issue of Balance

In the photographic spaces of voluntourism, visual distinctions between voluntourist and voluntoured are required to inform the viewer of how the voluntourism experience is organized. While most volunteers pictured in photographs in my research are white, the diversity of Canadians who participate in voluntourism necessitates the presence of non-white volunteers in host countries. Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana articulates how to make distinctions between volunteers and locals in this way:

Most of the images I saw were of a white volunteer with a bunch of villagers or like local people. [There] was a Japanese Canadian girl who volunteered so you can tell, “ok she looks physically different,” and so in
the pictures you can tell that “ok this person is the volunteer and these are the people that she’s working with.” That was my perception of it.

Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana acknowledges visible markers of difference between volunteers and locals in terms of skin colour or racial identity: as I note in the previous chapter, the odd one out is likely the volunteer.

Because voluntourism operates in a racialized context (Simpson 42), the topic of racial identity—most often articulated in relation to “whiteness”—was often discussed during interviews. For instance, when asked about the content of a “typical” image or advertisement for voluntourism, Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana identifies volunteers as “white” or “European.” Volunteer Thailand suggests a voluntourism poster would feature “an ethnic child with a Westerner” (Volunteer Thailand). Most of the images I consider in the previous chapter feature almost exclusively white volunteers. To explore this issue, I asked past participants if they had volunteered with people who were not white. Many said yes (Volunteer El Salvador; Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana; Volunteer India; Volunteer South America-India; Volunteer Ghana 2). When I asked Volunteer South America-India if there were any pictures of non-white volunteers on her organization’s website she said: “I want to say yes but I can’t really say for sure.” What followed was a discussion of how to distinguish volunteers from locals when skin colour is not a viable choice. Volunteer South America-India said, “I also remember seeing a picture recently of a black volunteer with a bunch of black people and I remember thinking ‘wow, it’s hard to tell that there’s

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Note that this question was not asked of all volunteers: it was added later on in the interview process when patterns of voluntourism advertising and past participants’ awareness of “whiteness” in voluntourism became more apparent. I acknowledge that there is bias in this question which favours the centrality of images of white volunteers in voluntourism’s promotional media. I refer to a comment I made in chapter two (“Function over Form”) regarding the subject of this thesis: that Western thought and imaging processes recreate ethnicity, culture, race and class to cater to their own needs. This question is meant to reveal that the appearance of racial and cultural homogeneity in voluntourism’s promotional media is incongruent with actual participant demographics.
a volunteer in there.” Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana stated that distinctions were made through clothing and mannerisms when volunteers were non-white.

One volunteer said she was “considered white” in her destination country. Such an experience is not uncommon. Patricia Noxolo, a black British VSO worker in Ghana, describes her experiences with “honoury [sic] whiteness” as disruptive of her black identity as an “access route into initiating dialogue with people of the third world” (qtd. in Simpson 42). In Ghana, I had open discussions about whiteness and blackness with both my Ghanaian and Canadian friends. As Tamari Kitossa asserts race is lived, and in the context in which I was living, widely discussed. I was acquainted with another Canadian volunteer in my area who self-identified as black and Muslim. Both of these categories describe the majority of the local population in the city in which we lived. In her travels throughout the city she was often referred to as “salaminga,” which literally translates as “white” but is widely applied to all foreigners. Because voluntourism (and tourism [Urry 142-144]) operates in a racialized context, the designation of all foreigners as “white” maintains the current paradigm. It is possible that “white” culture and “Western” culture are seen as identical and that within the spaces of voluntourism, white people are viewed as symbols of the West, just as non-white people are used as symbols of development in Western photographs.

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12 Though never explicitly stated, her statement implies that she is not considered white in Canada.
13 This is also true of the term “obruni” in southern regions of Ghana.
14 One volunteer, who self-identified as white during our interview, offered the following anecdote on whiteness in the spaces of voluntourism: “When I was . . . in [destination country], we went on a trip to [two neighbouring countries], which [are places] with a lot of tourists . . . it was with a geography class that we were there and we were studying tourism. The project that we had was to interview tourists [there] and figure out why they were there, where they were from, what their impressions were and so on, and we were just supposed to stop them in the street. So I said to my friends, who were [from my destination country], “How are we going to know who the tourists are?” And they said, “Really, [name]?” And then I looked down at myself and “No wait, got it. Got it. I understand. Ok. We’ll find them.”” This volunteer’s
Visible Technology

Some volunteers expressed surprise at the level of development that had already been reached in their destination country, betraying a lack of knowledge about the availability of technology in the developing world. This unawareness suggests that the images of the developing world that are seen in the West overlook some of the realities of twenty-first century life. Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana’s initial reactions to both of her destination countries were striking for her:

So when I got [to Uruguay] I was expecting to see poverty kind of like what I experienced in Ghana, but it wasn’t: there was modern buildings, there was people driving Porches . . . and like everyone was very fashionable, they all had cell phones . . . The family that I lived with, they were well off…and most of the people in that town were. . . . It didn’t seem like a poor country to me. Whereas when I got Ghana it kind of, not “met” my expectations, but it was kind of what I expected, you know, to see poverty and not modern houses like you would see in North America . . . so I guess Ghana kind of met my expectations I guess you could say but Uruguay definitely didn’t.¹⁵

Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana found the poverty she was expecting to see in Ghana, which was her second placement with a voluntourism organization. Another volunteer who worked in Ghana found the opposite:

Some things were surprising to me. Like some people had laptops and like electronics that I actually didn’t think could ever make it there. I didn’t think anyone would have that. And obviously not everybody did but I didn’t expect cell phones to be fairly commonplace. They were pretty popular.
(Volunteer Ghana)

Preconceptions of a developing world lacking technology reinforce the power of tech objects as symbols of “development” or “modernization.” As I argue in the previous chapter, owning objects such as cameras or cell phones suggests a certain benchmark of experience suggests that the visual economy of voluntourism promotes stereotyping by both volunteers and locals.

¹⁵ Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana added that the organization she volunteered with in Uruguay eliminated the program the year following her placement because the desired level of development had been achieved.
material wealth and a purchase outside of basic needs. When countries are advertised as places where basic needs are not met, it comes as quite a shock for volunteers to find themselves surrounded by cell phones (with better service).

Cameras are ubiquitous in present-day contact zones, used to commemorate “co-presence.” All volunteers indicated that they brought cameras on their sojourns abroad. Volunteer Thailand notes that “it’s hard to always have a camera out taking pictures . . . Whenever you did take a camera out the kids did sort of gravitated towards you, just because I guess it was a toy . . . Well, I don’t know if that’s what the perception was . . . If you had a camera they loved you . . .” Volunteer Thailand’s comments (which echo my own experiences in Ghana [see Chapter 4]) reflect the power of the camera to capture attention, as well as photographs.

There is a fine line between photographic documentation and voracious image-collecting. I took 58 photographs in three and a half months in Ghana. Volunteer Costa Rica remembers taking “about a thousand” photographs on her month-long placement. Such high numbers recalls Harngh Luh Sin’s account of a group of eleven Singaporean volunteers in South Africa. He discusses the “incessant desire” of voluntourists as tourists to photograph everything they see, “ranging from children, to scenery and pictures of the township, to wildlife and flora” (493). Collectively, these volunteers took 14,000 photographs in 26 days. Sin writes that voluntourists cannot shed completely the

16 How volunteers used cameras to document their time abroad varied considerably. Volunteer El Salvador had a team of fellow volunteers documenting a series of workshops she hosted on her placement; Volunteer India and Volunteer Philippines-South Africa have no images of the people with which they worked at the behest of their organizations; Volunteer South America-India has several images of herself in India, none of which she planned; one volunteer was hired by her organization as a photographer and videographer; Volunteer Guyana has photographs of herself with locals and children, as does Volunteer Thailand; and Volunteer Ghana 3 took photographs of the women with which she worked in her office placement.
mantle of “tourist” and are constantly negotiating their identities as “tourist” or “volunteer” within the spaces of voluntourism (493).

The Madonnas of Voluntourism

The image that was reproduced most consistently in interviews was the image I term the “Madonna of Voluntourism.” Volunteer Thailand described “that picture of the really sweet foreign child and [a volunteer]. It’s just become sort of a motif I guess.” In the previous chapter I state that this image—a white female volunteer with one or more local non-white children—is ubiquitous in marketing voluntourism. When asked about her expectations of her role in her destination country prior to departure, Volunteer East Africa replied,

[I expected to be in] a helping role, like I thought I was going to go in and be the mother for these orphan children, for sure. You can’t walk away from that, that’s definitely part of . . . our social construction. . . . You can’t help it, you meet these kids and they’re darling and they’re emotionally deprived. . . .

Volunteer East Africa’s motivation to care for children appears to stem from an emotional connection based on a traditional, socially-constructed idea of the relationship between women and children. The desire to participate in this relationship is common among volunteers. Volunteer El Salvador (who has spent ten years volunteering between Canada and El Salvador) noticed a similar attitude among young students she was supervising on a recent trip. Having her reservations about the use of this kind of imagery, she said,

It was especially tough being with this group that I was chaperoning this year because—and I understand . . . I was trying so hard to put myself back in their shoes because I was doing the same thing ten years ago—but that’s all they wanted: their new Facebook profile picture to be them with a handful of Salvadoran babies in their arms, and laughing and having fun.
The desire to record images of oneself volunteering with children suggests that it is the visibility of the mother-and-child relationship which holds meaning in the West rather than mothering itself. There is also the possibility that volunteers mimic the images they saw in their preparation and orientation phases, as in John Urry’s hermeneutic circle of tourism (140). Heron’s findings based on interviews with past development workers echoes this sentiment. Bourgeois feminine subjectivity appeared to be best constituted by the “good” that was done while on long-term placement in Africa (91-122).  

The use of images of children on their own (Laura Briggs’ “imploring waif” [180]) resonated with volunteers as well. Some articulated how advertising images from organizations such as World Vision (Volunteer Ghana 3; Volunteer Philippines-South Africa) are meant to elicit sympathy and attract business by offering images of children in need.  

When discussing why volunteers take pictures of children, Volunteer El Salvador was puzzled, given that these volunteers “mostly don’t know the kids names, where they live, where their parents are. They just know that they’re running around where we’re working for whatever reason so why is that, as an image, so important?”

Many volunteers mentioned this Madonna-and-child imagery without solicitation on the subject, some of them expressing disdain—a desire to “roll their eyes” (Volunteer South America-India)—and anger. Some, on the other hand, defended the use of these images as a simple reflection of life in the host country. As Volunteer Guyana said,

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17 Heron uses the term “bourgeois” rather than “white” because it inherently reflects race, class and gender and the interconnectedness of these factors in the creation of “whiteness” (6).

18 World Vision was mentioned more than once and without solicitation. World Vision also runs its own volunteer abroad program called “Destination Life Change” which offers two week placements in a variety of countries in the South (“World Vision Canada: Destination Life Change”). The image featured on this page is of a smiling white woman sitting behind a smiling black girl in a tattered dress. The woman’s hands are dirty but she reaches around the girl’s waist to grab her hands. This is another instance of the Madonna of Voluntourism in voluntourism promotion.
I have lots of pictures of me with little kids and everyone’s happy and smiling and having fun playing a game or hanging out or whatever so I wouldn’t say it’s like totally misleading or anything . . . you have those moments. . . . It’s less about the volunteer work that you’re doing and more about just being with the people.

The use of Madonna imagery in promotional photographs is uniform while the circumstances leading up their capture vary. Such variation suggests that images are made symbolic upon distribution and that documentation of an event is not the goal in voluntourism promotion, echoing Alexandra Coghlan’s finding that messages sent by volunteer organizations and the messages received by potential volunteers differ (17).

**Comments on Visual Literacy**

Earlier in this thesis, I question the visual literacy of the average Westerner.¹⁹ Scott Lash and John Urry define what they call the “post-tourist,” one who is aware of the fabrication and “manufactured diversity” (277) of the tourist trade. They suggest that post-tourists (which is almost everyone) “have to become skilled at interpreting [tourist] images, doing semiotic work; and they are increasingly reflexive about their society, its products and images” (277). I feel that Lash and Urry’s argument most accurately applies to tourists’ own experiences as mainstream mass tourists, that is, tourists know they are tourists and are willingly participating in and reflecting on a commercial experience (275-276). Although it is a branch of mass tourism, voluntourism is complicated by a perceived “helping imperative” which necessitates power imbalances that go beyond those of traditional tourism (a relationship based on mostly consumption and monetary exchange). Despite my misgivings, volunteers showed clear understanding of the

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¹⁹ Since all participants are university educated, this does not make them “average Westerners” in that university education is afforded mostly to economically privileged individuals. These individuals will have a greater understanding of global power relations and colonial history that may affect the perceptiveness of their responses. However, this does not mean that they are “visually literate.”
relationships between image and lived experience, as well as the specific desires and emotions voluntourism’s promotional media try to evoke.

I asked volunteers, “knowing what you know now, what, if anything, would you change about voluntourism advertising?” Several acknowledged that voluntourism is currently marketed effectively, stating that ads are designed to be “inspirational” and convince people that they will change the world (Volunteer Ghana) or are meant to “hook” potential participants (Volunteer El Salvador). The tropes are well known by volunteers. When making a fundraising poster for the project she worked on, Volunteer East Africa “was able to pick out of all [her] pictures the ones that [she] knew people would respond to.” She chose an image of herself kneeling with a group of local children (fig. 47).  

Figure 47. Volunteer East Africa in Uganda. Fundraising photograph. Personal photograph (printed with permission, edited at the request of the volunteer).

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20 In one case, an organization formally rejected the use of children in promotional media. Volunteer Philippines-South Africa’s organization was “careful about how their photos represented . . . kids [because] they didn’t want to exploit the children.” She continued, “Hilary Clinton came through the Philippines and wanted to do a photo op with them . . . and it would have meant a lot of money for the organization and they refused, because these kids aren’t here to take photos of, these kids are here to love.”
Many volunteers revisited the issue of voluntourism promotion with their concerns on the subject: accuracy and ethical issues surrounding exploitation of locals (particularly children) feature in their responses. Volunteer El Salvador, who admitted she felt that “from an advertising point of view, they’re doing it right,” said,

[Organizations] could be more accurate and show more balanced photos but what I’m trying to figure out is, if that’s doing better for achieving the purpose that they’re setting out to do. Like whether it’s wrong for them to be selling it in this kind of way.

Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana, responding to a question about the accuracy of ads, said “[It’s] a realistic representation of what could occur on a volunteer placement but again I don’t think someone should use those pictures and be like ‘this is going to be my experience.’ I think you need to take them with a grain of salt.” When I asked her if people know how to take promotional images with a grain of salt, she replied,

No, I would say not. I would say speaking now from having done that and gone through that experience several times now . . . if I were to do something like that again, I would take [the pictures] with a grain of salt. But for someone’s first time they’re probably going to go “this is going to be my experience” and if they don’t get that experience they may be disappointed. Or it may exceed their expectations. Who knows?

Patrick Fuery and Kelli Fuery (2) as well as David Weintraub (198) claim that people do not and are not encouraged to view images critically. Urry (100-102), and Lash and Urry (309) suggest that the postmodern tourist has a certain degree of semiotic skill in interpreting tourist signs. Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana claims that she possesses this skill but others (especially first-time volunteers) do not. Volunteer South America-India and Volunteer El Salvador were also able to discuss image construction explicitly. Apart

21 Lash and Urry say that the ideal cosmopolitan (by their definition, an extension of the post-tourist) approaches tourist signs “coolly, or in a detached fashion” and as “partly ironic” (309).

22 These volunteers are educated on the subject of image construction: they completed courses in media and anthropology; tourism and media; and media and social services. Another volunteer was a professional
from recognizing visual tropes in voluntourism (such as the Madonna and child), other volunteers did not do this. This may indicate the importance of education to awareness of the intersectionality of voluntourism: volunteers must choose to educate themselves and take a critical approach.

It may not be in the voluntourism industry’s best interest to undermine traditional visual patterns. Europe maintained its presence in colonial outposts by sending images (and therefore evidence) of colonial savagery back to the metropole: the perceived necessity of “civilized” intervention was supported through such representation (Pieterse 98). For international volunteer or aid organizations to maintain their presence in developing nations there must be a persistent and unyielding stream of information that suggests that presence is justified. I suggest that in voluntourism (as opposed to simply “aid”) rather than show scenes of abject poverty, volunteer organizations emphasize the benefits of their presence in developing countries by showing positive relationships between volunteers and locals.

**Conclusion**

This chapter shows how volunteers have experienced the images presented to them by the voluntourist visual economy. Some negotiate their relationship to images of voluntourism with scepticism, others with an innocent gaze. It is clear that the effect of the polysemic nature of images (Barthes 38-39) is not lost on volunteers. I outline how the lived experience of participants in the spaces of voluntourism relates to the voluntourism sign economy and how participants reconcile their experiences with their expectations.
Urry suggests that images used in tourist advertisements reflect what is going on in “normal society” (2). Pictures taken by voluntourists themselves reflect the values of participants: what they find beautiful and interesting, what their experience meant to them, and how they spent their time abroad. In this way, they act as documents. As for voluntourism organizations, images used on their websites were not described by volunteers as directly influencing their decision to volunteer abroad (with a few exceptions) but were nonetheless well known. The detached and easy-to-remember nature of promotional images contributes to their function as signs.

Volunteer Ghana 2 was adamant that images cannot be used to “hammer into someone “Okay, this is how you have to think,” but rather can give potential volunteers “the space or opportunity to form their opinions.” As Gunn postulated, that space can be filled with information from many other non-commercial sources (37-38), hence the lack of memory for specific pre-departure images among volunteers. Such non-specific memory for images suggests that a wider range of influences is present not only in destination image formation, but in drawing conclusions about other peoples and places in general. While the power of images may not be absolute, photographs still play a vital role in the transmission of perceptions.

The following chapter examines the visual economy of voluntourism in the Canadian multicultural context. While Canada is not unique in its multicultural composition, it is the first country in the world to legislate multiculturalism as part of its national identity. As a result, a great number of cultural and ethnic backgrounds—ranging from new immigrants to second-, third- and later-generation Canadians—move within and between shared socio-political spaces. Canadian society daily illustrates the effects of
continued and constantly evolving “co-presence.” By treating Canada as a contact zone, I highlight the effects of the visual economy of voluntourism on Canadians’ daily lives. I suggest that promotional images presented by Canadian voluntourism organizations fuel persistent divisions between white and non-white, and reinforce the government’s conceptualization of what it means to be “Canadian.”
Chapter 6. Voluntourism and the Canadian Multicultural Context

This final chapter concludes my arguments and addresses how voluntourist promotional media function in Canadian society. John Urry writes that the examination of the “tourist gaze” can reflect what is going on in “normal society” (3). I demonstrate that this is true for the “voluntourist gaze,” or what I have termed the visual economy of voluntourism. In Canada, the idea of “normal society” is informed by official multiculturalism policy: as the 1988 *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (or Bill C-93) is understood to suggest, of the many different cultural groups which constitute Canada’s population, no single culture is meant to be given prominence over any other. Smaro Kamboureli claims that Canadian state “metanarratives” such as Bill C-93, the 1982 *Canadian Constitution* and the 1968 *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* have fallen into “disarray” (209). She suggests that debates surrounding these laws show that Canada is working to “un-learn its colonial legacy by learning to understand and respect racial and cultural differences” (209). As I show in this thesis, the process of un-learning has yet to inform images produced by government-funded volunteer programs.

Because all of my chosen organizations use “Canada” or “Canadian” in their organization name, they identify themselves with the Canadian nation-state. All of them also receive funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and are thus affiliated with the Canadian government. According to the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (5), as a federal agency CIDA is required to actively pursue multiculturalism and to work to eliminate discrimination Most voluntourism organizations, in the promotion of volunteering abroad, do not respect the actual diversity of the participants in their programs and thus do not reflect multiculturalism policy in that
area of their self-representation. It could even be argued, in contrast, that voluntourism organizations’ promotional media demonstrate a reliance on Canada’s colonialisit legacy.

Underscoring the relationship of colonialism to voluntourism organizations is the activity of some of the organizations in Aboriginal communities in Canada. Such activity, combined with the situation of Aboriginal peoples in the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1, 3), suggests how Canada views its First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in relation to the Canadian nation-state and its multiculturalism policy. In short, following Jon Stratton and Ien Ang, I consider aboriginality in this chapter as marking the limits of state multiculturalism (Stratton and Ang 157; 159). As such, I would add to their observation that aboriginality is solidly located within the limits of voluntourism.

With this in mind, I examine voluntourism’s promotional media in relation to the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* because the Act in part determines the nature of the representation of cultural difference in Canada. Kamboureli writes that in examining cultural difference there must be “awareness that the representation of otherness cannot be examined in isolation from such political and institutional realities as Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism” (210). She continues to say that such an examination of the politics of representation “reflect[s] the urgent need to address the materiality of cultural difference in ways that . . . broaden our [sic] terms of reference without producing old polarities in the guise of benevolent hegemonies” (210). At present, voluntourism’s promotional images are not being subjected to such analysis. To illustrate this point, I begin with an examination of a promotional photograph for voluntourism in Canada and the repercussions of conducting voluntourism within Aboriginal communities. I follow with an analysis of the effects of the language of multiculturalism and the visual economy
of voluntourism on the ways in which Canadians are encouraged to experience 
“ethnicity,” “diversity,” and “cultural difference.”

**Voluntourism in Canadian Aboriginal Communities**

Of the organizations studied in this thesis, only CESO offers placements in First Nations, 
Inuit and Métis communities in Canada.¹ CESO sends volunteers to aboriginal 
communities in Ontario, Quebec, Nunavut, Atlantic Canada and Western Canada and 
provides “accessible, and cost-effective services to First Nations, Métis and Inuit 
individuals, communities, organizations and businesses” (“Where We Work: Canada”). 
As with every other location in which CESO works, each geographical area is 
represented by a photograph. Representing Nunavut is a photograph captioned CESO 
*Lead Volunteer Advisor Katherine Steward on assignment in Iqaluit* (fig. 48).

In this picture, a solitary white woman stands before a northern landscape. The 
photograph is divided in half horizontally. In the upper half of the frame, a blue-grey sky 
and sea blend together, broken only by small strips of tundra. The lower half of the frame 
is comprised of new but sparse buildings, rough tundra, some vehicles in a parking lot 
(including a snowmobile), shipping containers, and a single road leading from the bottom 
left to the centre of the photograph. The image of the volunteer—a blond middle-aged 
woman in a blue sweater—fills the frame, dividing it in half again vertically. As with 
CECI’s image of the worker in a rice paddy in chapter four (fig. 11), the landscape 
reflects the presence of “development”—its ongoing status denoted by the presence of the 
volunteer. While there is no indication of the exact role the volunteer in Iqaluit plays in 

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¹ CWY also works in Canada but the destinations and demographics of recipients are unclear. Other 
Canadian organizations that work with Aboriginal communities include InternEx (“InternEx”) and 
Katimavik (“Our areas of impact”).

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the development of the community, the caption indicates that she is actively “on
assignment.”

In the visual economy of voluntourism, a sense of “foreignness” must be visually
communicated: as I discuss in chapters four and five, geographical and cultural distance
from “home” are desired features and motivating factors for voluntourists. CESO’s image
highlights visible differences in the landscape by picturing the volunteer outdoors and
offering a contrast between “civilization” (the townscape) and “wilderness” (the tundra-
and-ocean backdrop) within a single frame. Similar contrast is seen CWY’s image of a
volunteer posing in front of a tropical village holding potted plants (fig. 14). In both of
these images, the volunteers embody the notion of “progress” by standing for (acting as a
sign of) the work of their respective organizations (see Chapter 4). Through its
manipulation of landscape and the notion of geographic “foreignness,” CESO applies the
visual economy of voluntourism to a Canadian landscape.

Figure 48. CESO Lead Volunteer Adviser Katherine Steward on assignment in Iqaluit.
Work/Canada/Nunavut.aspx
If, as I say in the previous chapter, promotional images are created and consumed as contact zones, my analysis is disrupted by this image of Iqaluit for a number of reasons. First, I spend little time in this thesis examining images of single white volunteers posed in front of a “foreign” landscape: most of the images analysed in this paper focus on interpersonal relationships between voluntourists and voluntoured in destination countries. Secondly, to show an image of a solitary volunteer disrupts my discussion of promotional images as “contact zones” in the literal sense, since contact or “co-presence” between voluntourists and voluntoured is not shown. Thirdly, by showing only the volunteer and the landscape, the viewer is left with a sense of “presence” instead of “co-presence;” of separation instead of interaction; and of divergent understandings and practices (see Pratt 8). In CESO’s image of Iqaluit, the arctic landscape is made to represent the “otherness” of the north: the native peoples of the area—the Inuit—are omitted entirely. The visiting volunteer is assigned with bringing “development” and government-backed expertise to an invisible people.

CESO’s photograph is taken in Canada. The name of the territory, Nunavut (meaning “Our Land” in Inuktitut [“Tunngasugitti”]), immediately denotes the presence of the Inuit people, their language and their cultural practice. However, their presence is not warranted in this photograph. This image is indicative of what Vine Deloria Jr. calls the Western preoccupation with “solitary concentration on the individual to the exclusion of the group” (qtd. in Atleo 8). Cliff Atleo Jr. suggests that no matter the intentions, organizations, governments and individuals seek to address “gaps” between indigenous and settler groups in Canada. The desire to identify and address “gaps,” he says, suggests an agreement on universal norms of community development (based on the Western
notion of “progress”) which may not exist (Atleo 3-4). Indeed CESO’s objective in Nunavut supports this notion. Their goal is to “assist the people of Nunavut to improve their social and economic environment” (“Where We Work: Canada: Nunavut”).

Alteo’s use of language is indicative of the current relationship between the government of Canada and Aboriginal peoples. He describes these two groups as “settler” and “indigenous” (3). The term “settler” (as opposed to “settler descendants”) alludes to the process of colonialism as ongoing. CESO’s image of Iqaluit supports this notion: a white volunteer stands before a vast landscape, bridging the gap between wilderness and civilization literally (in terms of the composition) and figuratively (in her role as a “lead advisor”). This photograph is representative of a contact zone, but of the contact zone as colonial frontier (Pratt 8).

**Multiculturalism and Aboriginal Peoples** The preamble of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* notes that the government of Canada “recognizes the rights of aboriginal peoples” (1). The Act goes on to exempt the governments of the Northwest Territories, Yukon and Nunavut as well as “any Indian band” (3) from the obligations of federal institutions under the Act.²

Stratton and Ang examine the politics of Aboriginality in settler society.³ Australia also has extensive government policies related to official multiculturalism, though these policies are connected to an entirely separate legal discourse, one which defined Australia as a “white nation” early in its history (148). They write that Aboriginal

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² These obligations include the promotion of policies, programs and practices that “enhance understanding of and respect for the diversity of the members of Canadian society,” the collection of statistical data to enable to development of the above policies, programs and practices, and the use, “as appropriate, of the language skills and cultural understanding of individuals of all origins” (4).

³ Stratton and Ang’s discussion focuses on multiculturalism as official state cultural policy in Australia as it is in Canada. They discuss this in relation to pluralism in the United States. Much of their discussion of multiculturalism as official state cultural policy is applicable as well in the Canadian context.
peoples are also excluded from multiculturalism debates in Australia (Stratton and Ang 159). The treatment of Aboriginal peoples in the Act positions them outside of the “imagined multicultural community” of Canada (Stratton and Ang 135). As Stratton and Ang point out, it would be impossible to include Aboriginal peoples in multiculturalism policy because to do so would erase the memory of colonial dispossession and genocide, and the effects those events continue to have to the lives of Aboriginal peoples (159). Thus, Aboriginality marks the limits of multiculturalism in settler societies such as Australia and Canada where it is official state cultural policy.

However, the exclusion of the Inuit community from CESO’s image of Nunavut reveals no awareness of colonial continuities in imaging techniques. Deborah Cherry describes “pictorializing”—manipulating non-Western space in a Western European aesthetic framework—as a tool for denying the violence of colonialism (41-42). Widespread dissemination of “picturesque, orderly and inhabitable representation[s]” (Thompson 65, emphasis mine)—denoted in CESO’s image by the presence of buildings, vehicles and the volunteer overseer—is meant to depict the beneficence of the colonizing force. To not understand or recognize the continuities between colonial acts and depictions of colonial acts is to underestimate the power of visual images. To promote northern voluntourism with such an image demonstrates that the Canadian government has not yet “un-learned” its colonial legacy (Kamboureli 209).

The Government of Canada and Aboriginal peoples continue to work towards the resolution of ongoing issues of social and political justice.4 Until these issues are resolved

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4 See Atleo for examples such as Pierre Trudeau’s White Paper, the Meech Lake Accord, the Charlottetown Accord and the Oka Crisis. Atleo also examines the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples; the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development; and the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, commenting on their use of neoliberal language that seeks to “make colonialism nicer” (31). It
however, a colonial relationship still exists between the Canadian government and Aboriginal peoples (Atleo 3). Since the focus of this thesis is Canadian volountourism organizations’ activities in post-colonial states, the method of my analysis cannot fully address the complexities of volountourism in Aboriginal communities. Instead I turn to more subtle instances of colonialism, racism and discrimination against “visible minorities” and immigrant groups in Canada that are perpetuated by volountourism’s promotional images in conjunction with Canada’s multiculturalism policy.

**Defining Multiculturalism**

For this chapter I draw on policy documents, government publications on multiculturalism, secondary policy analysis and sociological analysis from Canada and Australia, as well as my discussions with volunteers during interviews. Earlier I note that it is the function of an image in a society that matters most, not its intended message (Chapter 2). I choose to include lived experience of multiculturalism for the same reason: how multiculturalism functions for Canadians is equally important as government definitions. A Government of Canada document suggests that Canadians are “generally supportive of a multicultural society, at least in principle if not always in practice” (Lehman), with greater support in younger demographics. The author of the document, Mark Lehman, suggests that Canadians are not necessarily sure what multiculturalism is, which results in an “indiscriminate application of the term to a wide range of situations, practices, expectations and goals” (Lehman).

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should be noted that the government has undertaken projects that seek to address past atrocities against Aboriginal and immigrant groups. These include the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which is working to heal the wounds left by residential schools (Castellano et al. xiii) and financial redress for the Chinese Head Tax (“Chinese Head Tax”). However, these programs are time-sensitive and only available to those who apply to participate.

5 The general national approval rating for multiculturalism at the time Lehman was writing was 54%, but increased to 66% when the sample was limited to people ages 18 to 30 (Lehman). All of the volountourism participants in this thesis fit into this age group.
Such “indiscriminate application” is clearly evident in the variety of volunteer responses to my question, “If I say “Canadian multiculturalism” what comes to mind?” Many volunteers answered, “Toronto” before elaborating on their response. Others referred to “the reality of living together” (Volunteer East Africa), “a bunch of different ethnicities” (Volunteer Costa Rica), and the tossed “salad bowl” metaphor (Volunteer Philippines-South Africa). One volunteer called multiculturalism “the environment that Canada provides . . . where people from many different cultures and backgrounds can come together and share common experiences” (Volunteer Thailand). Responses such as these are considered in relation to the discourse of diversity later in this chapter.

Others’ ideas of multiculturalism were less positive. Volunteer Philippines-South Africa noted the “tension” inherent in multiculturalism. One volunteer suggested that multiculturalism is “the image we try to portray . . . versus the reality that we have” (Volunteer El Salvador). Another said: “personally, I don’t feel like Canada as a whole is multicultural. I’d say [there are] little communities . . . that are multicultural but overall I’d say Canada isn’t” (Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana). Anthropologist Eva Mackey’s analysis of the “Canada 125” celebrations in 1992 (7) incorporated many small-town festivals and events and revealed hesitance and hostility towards multiculturalism. The remainder of this chapter attempts to explain the relationship between international voluntourism, multiculturalism and Canadian society as an answer to Mackey’s question: “How might we map the ways in which dominant powers maintain their grip despite the proliferation of cultural difference?” (5-6).

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6 Toronto advertises itself as one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. The 2006 census reported that 43% of Toronto’s Census Metropolitan Area identified as visible minorities (52.4% of those living in the Greater Toronto Area); that Toronto’s population accounts for 22.9% of all visible minority persons in Canada; and that residents identified with over 200 distinct ethnic groupings. (“Toronto: Backgrounder”).
Multiculturalism as Law

The Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988; hereafter the Act) reads in part,

3. (1) It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to:
   (a) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects
   the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the
   freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and
   share their cultural heritage . . .
   (f) encourage and assist the social, cultural economic and political
   institutions of Canada to be both respectful and inclusive of Canada’s
   multicultural character . . .

5. (1) The Minister [responsible for Multiculturalism] shall . . .
   (a) encourage and assist individuals, organizations and institutions to
   project the multicultural reality of Canada in their activities in Canada and
   abroad . . .
   (c) encourage and promote exchanges and cooperation among the diverse
   communities of Canada;
   (d) encourage and assist the business community, labour organizations,
   voluntary and private organizations, as well as public institutions, in
   ensuring full participation in Canadian society, including the social and
   economic aspects, of individuals of all origins and their communities, and
   in promoting respect and appreciation of the multicultural reality of
   Canada. . . (3-5, emphasis mine).

I situate my arguments in the context of multiculturalism as a highly controversial policy because of its “real and perceived (in)compatibility with national unity” (Stratton and Ang 135). Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau first suggested in 1971 that “although there are two official languages, there is no official culture” in Canada (Kamboureli 213). Kamboureli argues that by attempting to deny the interdependency of culture and language Trudeau overlooked the fact that the dominant culture (at least outside of Québec) is English-speaking (Kamboureli 213; Bannerji 91; Mackey 21).7 In launching

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7 Note that Mackey’s description of the dominant culture as English-speaking is conceived in opposition to “non English-speaking” groups such as French Canadians. Mackey omits any direct reference to the English language as contributing to the concept of the “ordinary” or “Canadian-Canadian” in her study of “whiteness” in Canada (19-21). There is much more to say on national identity and Québec (or so-called French Canada) but the topic will not be covered here. I choose to focus on volontourism based in so-called English Canada. For discussions of English-French relations in Canada see part three, “Canada and
multicultural policy from a so-called “blind spot” (Kamboureli 213), the government of Canada rendered the violent colonial legacy of English culture invisible.

Annually, each federal government agency must submit to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) (the ministry responsible for multiculturalism) a form which outlines how it is meeting the standards of the Act. CIDA submits to CIC’s *Annual Report on the Operation of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act: Promoting integration* (2007-08; 2008-2009; 2009-10) to report on its yearly multiculturalism initiatives.\(^8\) The submission form consists of several yes/no questions regarding multiculturalism initiatives of the previous year. For example, the first question on the form reads,

> Does your institution’s vision, mission, mandate or priorities statement include a reference to multiculturalism or cultural diversity? If so, please provide the relevant section. If the reference to multiculturalism was first introduced during the 2010-2011 reporting period, *please highlight* the change (Canada, *Annual 2*, emphasis in the original).

The form requests evidence that an agency’s mandate includes language that refers to multiculturalism or cultural diversity. The form asks more detailed questions about policies and programming from each institution, but ultimately, information is collected and redistributed by CIC in written form. Each report is meant to underscore the efficacy of the Act and its legitimacy within Canadian society (Canada, “Introduction”). By monitoring the success of multiculturalism in each federal institution, the “dominant powers” at CIC control the “proliferation of cultural difference” by institutionalizing it and actively

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8 Procedures for submission to the *Annual Report*, as well as the submission forms, are available on CIC’s website (“Submission”). Submission forms vary in length and depth depending on the size of the agency. Small agencies are required to submit three pages, while larger agencies (over 500 employees) submit a nine page form. The form also requests the name of the institution’s “Multiculturalism Champion” (if one has been appointed) (Canada, *Annual 1*).
monitoring its progress. This supports Kamboureli’s statement that federal legal discourse is productive of ethnicity in Canada (214). The Government of Canada presents itself as an institution deeply committed to principles of inclusion and to the elimination of racial discrimination. This image is achieved through what Himani Bannerji terms the “discourse of diversity” (35).

The Discourse of Diversity

Bannerji describes the discourse of diversity as a constellation of terms that act as “device[s] for managing public and social relations and spaces . . . [and] as a form of moral regulation and happy co-existence” (47). Naturally, the discourse of diversity is seen in every aspect of official multicultural policy (Bannerji 40). Multiculturalism is defined by Lehman with a series of buzzwords and phrases:

As fact, "multiculturalism" in Canada refers to the presence and persistence of diverse racial and ethnic minorities who define themselves as different and who wish to remain so. Ideologically, multiculturalism consists of a relatively coherent set of ideas and ideals pertaining to the celebration of Canada’s cultural mosaic. Multiculturalism at the policy level is structured around the management of diversity through formal initiatives in the federal, provincial and municipal domains. Finally, multiculturalism is the process by which racial and ethnic minorities compete with central authorities for achievement of certain goals and aspirations (Lehman, emphasis mine).

Lehman’s words reflect the idea that multiculturalism is a multi-level policy meant to simultaneously “celebrate” and “manage” “diversity” in Canada (represented here by “racial and ethnic minorities”). Lehman’s statement positions racial and ethnic minorities in competition against each other for the recognition and approval of an unnamed dominant. This implies as well that the makeup of the “central authority” is not reflective of the racial or ethnic diversity of the population. Furthermore, Lehman’s definition invests the concept of “race” as a concrete marker of difference, specifically of
“minorities,” whereas the term “ethnic” does not necessarily carry with it the inherent visibility of the term “race” (Stratton and Ang 149).

As I discuss in chapter three, the visibility of racial, ethnic or cultural difference of colonized peoples is managed through the aesthetic conventions of promotion or concealment. The concept of the “visible minority” in Canada represents a unification of promotion and concealment in a post-colonial world: the emphasis on visibility denotes physical differences between whites and non-whites, while the use of “minority” suggests that non-whites are “politically minor players” (Bannerji 30). “Visible minority” is opposed to an “invisible majority.” Bannerji describes this majority as the “Canadian “we”,” a construct based not on the English and French languages as Canadian government rhetoric would lead one to believe, but based on the “European/North American physical origin—the body and the colour of the skin” (51). Bannerji states that use of the term “visible minority,” along with the “ideological imperatives of other categories—such as immigrants, aliens, foreigners, ethnic communities or New Canadians—constellate around the same binary code” (Bannerji 106, emphasis mine).  

Bannerji explains the repercussions of cultural classification based on skin colour in this way:

. . .our [sic] empirically being from other countries, with our particular looks, languages and cultures, has become an occasion for interpreting, constructing and ascribing difference with connotations of power relations. This process and its conceptual products combine into a political discourse and related ideological practices (35).

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9 This concept is not Bannerji’s alone. Barbara Heron (quoting Caren Kaplan) argues that the effect of multicultural policies on visible minority immigrants renders them “not quite citizens, but rather permanent ‘Third World-looking people’ and, as such, objects of government to be ‘welcomed, abused, defended, made accountable, analysed and measured’” (Heron 4; see Tagg, 62-63). Stratton and Ang reiterate this in the Australian context. They write that multiculturalism policy creates a division between “ethnic communities” and “Australian society,” negating any heterogeneity within both groups. This division “pigeonholes ‘the migrant’ as permanently marginalised, forever ethnicised [sic]” (Stratton and Ang 158).
The interpretation, construction and ascription of difference is perpetrated in an official sense by the government of Canada—Lehman’s “central authority”—embodied in CIC. Its “conceptual products,” namely the discourses of diversity and multiculturalism, are “behavioural imperatives” at the level of both state and society (Bannerji 40).

The Act demands the practice of “respect” and “inclusion,” for “recognition” and “appreciation” of diverse cultures in Canada. While researching Canadian national identity surrounding the “Canada 125” celebrations, Mackey indeed found average (white) Canadian citizens spouting this same rhetoric (98-102). What the policy does not explicitly indicate is that there are limits to the tolerance and acceptance of such diversity (Mackey 66; Bannerji 42). At the societal level, this can be expressed in what Mackey calls “white backlash” (5): expressions of anger at the inaccessibility of government funding for “Canadian-Canadians” (104) or lamentations of Canada’s perceived lack of national unity (105). Official multiculturalism positions “whiteness” as the standard against which all “difference” is measured. Labelling all differences simply as “diversity” allows multiculturalism’s “discursive affiliates” (such as “visible minority” or “ethnic and racial minorities”) to negate real social power relations between distinct groups (Bannerji 34).

Through multicultural and ethnic festivals such as those surrounding the “Canada 125” celebrations, and through a constant stream of government rhetoric about the inclusivity of the Canadian cultural environment, “central authorities” inspire the use of the discourse of diversity in everyday Canadian society. Bannerji
notes that even those who find its language suspect still use it for the sake of “intelligibility” (40). Because multiculturalism policy permeates every aspect of Canadian government activities, government-funded international volunteer programs are not exempt from the discourse of diversity. As I note in this thesis (Chapter 1, “Voluntourism”), the act of volunteering abroad is gaining momentum with Canadian youth through its prolific online promotion and heavy use of photographs. As James Littleton states, electronic images have a profound effect on the way people define their realities (x). The visual economy of voluntourism contributes to the mobilization of multiculturalism in Canada by converting the experience of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity into tourist commodities.

**Voluntourism and Multiculturalism: A Symbiotic Relationship**

The success of voluntourism is made possible by multiculturalism policy. Canadian voluntourism organizations actively seek volunteers who exhibit understanding of the discourse of diversity. CESO issues a call for tolerance in its volunteers, stating that they “shall not behave in any way contrary to Canadian law or ethical standards in [foreign jurisdictions], regardless of local practice” (“Become a Volunteer: Principles of Conduct”). Under the heading “Tolerance and understanding,” CCI says that as guests of the host country, participants “must be respectful and accepting of . . . [cultural] differences” (“Get involved: Is it for me?”). When asking the question “Who can participate?” CWY replies,

> Canada World Youth subscribes to diversity and equal opportunity in its recruitment efforts. It welcomes applications from indigenous peoples, visible and ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, women, persons of a minority sexual orientation and gender identities, and others who may contribute to further diversification (“Youth Leaders in Action”).
CESO conveys this sentiment in fewer words: “We respect others in all their
diversity” (“Mission, Vision and Values”). These organizations seek support and
participation from young Canadians: the first generation to grow up with multiculturalism
as official national policy, speaking the language of diversity. Because of federal
institutions’ obligations under the Act, providing funding for organizations that work to
“project the multicultural reality of Canada in their activities in Canada and abroad”
(Canadian Multiculturalism Act 5) is in the government’s best interests. Voluntourism
projects administered by CUSO-VSO, CWY, CCI, CESO and CECI—all funded by
CIDA—draw explicitly on, and contribute to Canada’s official discourse of diversity.

If the discourse of diversity did not champion the experience of ethnic, racial and
cultural difference, then paying to travel to countries outside of Canada to obtain those
experiences would not be attractive. As Bannerji states, the discourse of diversity is
predicated on visibility (35). What voluntourism adds to diversity and multiculturalism’s
visual discourse in Canada is the attractiveness of touristic representation. Potential
voluntourists are enticed to experience “real” ethnic, cultural and racial diversity through
touristic construction of (mostly) exotic destinations. Images used to promote the activity
(such as instances of visible cultural adaptation) reflect the enjoyment of immersion in
“diversity” (when, in actuality, volunteers—possibly for the first time in their lives—
embody “difference”). Multiculturalism discourse, in combination with the increasing
presence of the visual economy of voluntourism in popular online media, has real effects
on the expression and experience of racial, ethnic and cultural difference in Canada (see
Stratton and Ang 157). Like multiculturalism, voluntourism provides a venue for
experiencing difference via “safe channels” (Stratton and Ang 157). Tying these concepts
together is the thread of “development,” the notion of progress and modernization as the driving forces of social, economic and political stability.

The cultural capital acquired through volunteering abroad is heavily influenced by the discourse of diversity: the desirability of international or cross-cultural experience in one’s field is sometimes a motivating factor in the decision to volunteer (Volunteer Guyana; Volunteer Ghana; Volunteer South America-India). Voluntourism’s usefulness in this regard is reflected in the finding of that over fifty percent of returned volunteers surveyed by Universalia, E. T. Jackson & Associates and Salassan continue to work or volunteer in international or community development (60). They argue that Canadian voluntourism organizations produce up to 2500 “more globally aware citizens for Canada each year” (Universalia et al. 59). The governments of Ghana and Burkina Faso said that volunteers witness the “true reality” of their countries and help to rectify distorted images that are perpetuated by the popular media (Universalia et al. 59). Volunteer testimonies from interviews I conducted support this statement by expressing an almost uniform disconnect between the volunteers’ expectations and their experiences of their placements and host countries. Government statements combined with volunteer testimony indicates that the act of volunteering abroad may offer a venue for challenging preconceptions about peoples and places outside of Canada.

Voluntourism has the potential to create volunteers with more well-rounded understandings of global relations and issues upon return: what Ning Wang would call an “impression” gained through first-hand experience (135). ¹⁰ I realize that terms such as

¹⁰ There is no question that volunteers find immense value in their experiences abroad, but value is drawn from a variety of sources, backgrounds and contexts. Most volunteers said the value in voluntourism was the benefit to the individual volunteer in that the experience creates global awareness that could not gained any other way (Volunteer East Africa), that it removes participants from their “comfort zone” (Volunteer
“awareness” and “well-rounded” are closely related to the discourse of diversity and notions of ideal Canadian citizenship. However, I interpret the potential of voluntourism as James Clifford interprets ethnographic work: despite the activity’s implication in power relations, its function within those relations is “complex, often ambivalent [and] potentially counter-hegemonic” (9). But for any kind of counter-hegemony to be achieved, voluntourists must politicize their decision to volunteer.

**Conclusion**

Bannerji writes that the words used to express socio-political understandings are more than just words: they are ideological concepts (41). The visual economy of voluntourism is similar. Instead of written language, voluntourism’s promotional images use a visual grammar that maintains Westerners’ positions of power while at the same time acknowledging “difference,” be it in economic or social status, or racial, cultural or ethnic identity. This grammar and these differences are expressed in the use of non-Western landscapes stuffed into Western frames; in the affection of volunteers on placement for local dress; by the imbalanced contribution of whites and non-whites in photographic spaces; by pairing technological objects with expressions of local fascination; and by placing non-white children in the benevolent (but temporary) care of young white mother-figures.

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Ghana) or “bubble” (Volunteer Uruguay-Ghana), that it offers a learning experience that cannot be provided in a classroom (Volunteer Costa Rica, Volunteer El Salvador) and an opportunity to share that experience with friends and family (Volunteer Ghana 2), that it teaches participants other peoples’ ways of life (Volunteer Guyana) and increases participants’ awareness of living conditions around the world (Volunteer Ghana 3), and that it may spur development initiatives back home (Volunteer Thailand). When asked if voluntourism was important to achieving development goals (keeping in mind that eight volunteers already had degrees in global development studies), most volunteers said no. This questions the validity of voluntourism as an agent of development and is in direct opposition to government and voluntary organization sources which state that volunteers contribute a great deal to development and civil society in developing countries (see Universalia et al.).

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The perception of “Western civilization” as superior to the “developing world” is still strong. It is perpetuated by discourses of helping (Tiessen and Heron), rescue (Dubinsky 19; Briggs 180) and victimization (Pieterse 208-209) in pervasive charity campaigns. It is vital to note that more Canadians will have the opportunity to view voluntourism’s promotional images than will have the opportunity to volunteer.\textsuperscript{11} The consequences are illustrated in this thesis: some volunteers were shown no photographs by their organization prior to departure, yet all knew about the images I was discussing from having seen them elsewhere. This suggests that the act of preparing to volunteer (for a specific organization) is not necessary to form preconceptions about a specific region of the world and its peoples.

Discussions with volunteers revealed tensions between explicit understanding of colonial continuities in voluntourism and unwitting participation in the legacy, language and imagery of colonialism. For instance, many participants riled against images used in voluntourism but participated in the voluntourist visual economy themselves by taking similar images and sharing them upon their return to Canada.\textsuperscript{12} Reconciling the connections between colonialism and voluntourism is extremely difficult for any past participant, given the strictly negative connotation of the former the positive connotation of the latter. Volunteers are not to blame. Voluntourism organizations, with the help of the Canadian government, produce the discourses of helping identified by Barbara Heron and those who respond, as interviews with volunteers in this thesis suggest, do so with open hearts and good intentions.

\textsuperscript{11} Both multiculturalism and voluntourism can be considered as neo-liberal projects, as both rely on notions of “progress” and “development” for their success. As such, class divisions and socioeconomic status contribute to who has access to the supposed benefits of each.

\textsuperscript{12} Some of the objections to images used in voluntourism were formulated in retrospect.
I hope that volunteers—past, present, and future—consider the arguments in this paper as a call for critical engagement with the plethora of social and political issues that congregate in the spaces of voluntourism. Like Kate Simpson, I believe that the privileged position of voluntourist carries with it an ethical responsibility to be well-informed prior to departure, conscientious and self-aware while on placement, and reflexive upon return. My goal is not to condemn the actions of volunteers but to create awareness of the tools used in voluntourism’s promotional media to maintain colonial continuities between the West and the so-called developing world.
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Appendix 1: Interview Scripts

*Original Script*

**Trigger Interview Questions**

Further questions will arise based on participants’ responses

**Background information:**
Are you a Canadian citizen? Do you identify as “Canadian?”

With what organization did you volunteer?

Did you pay to volunteer or were you paid (honorarium, stipend, local salary, living allowance or similar)?

Did your volunteer work earn you any academic credits?

In what country(ies) or region(s) did you volunteer?

How long was the placement(s)?

In what year/s did you do the placement(s)?

**About your experience (focuses on images and impressions):**
How did you hear about volunteering abroad (brochure, study abroad fair, website, etc)?

What attracted you to the activity?

Did you have any contact or experience with the destination culture(s) prior to travelling?

What are your most significant recollections about preparing for your trip?

Did you research your destination country before travelling? If so, what sources did you use?

How did images (photographs, illustrations etc) factor in to your preparation?

Prior to leaving for volunteer work, how did you imagine your destination country/region/community?

Did your experience in your destination country/region/community match your expectations? Why or why not?

What did you imagine your role in the destination country/region/community to be?
Did your experience match your expectations of your role?

Can you recall a favourite image of your destination country/region/community? What key images do you associate with your destination?

Did you travel within your destination country? Did you see your voluntourism experience as a holiday or vacation?

What does international volunteering “look like” to you? For example, if you had to come up with a poster for your own international volunteer program, what would be on it?

**At home in Canada:**
At home in Canada, do you live in an urban, rural or small town setting?

How would you describe your community with regards to multiculturalism?

Had you any experience with cultures different from your own (at all) prior to travelling?

If I say “Canadian multiculturalism” what comes to mind?

**General:**
Overall, how did you feel about your experience volunteering?

Would you do it again? Why or why not?

Is volunteering abroad important to you? Is it important in general? Why or why not?

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**Final Script**

**Trigger Interview Questions**

Further questions will arise based on participants’ responses

**Background information:**
Are you a Canadian citizen? Do you identify as “Canadian?”

With what organization did you volunteer?

Did you pay to volunteer or were you paid (honorarium, stipend, local salary, living allowance or similar)?

Did your volunteer work earn you any academic credits?

In what country(ies) or region(s) did you volunteer?
How long was the placement(s)?

In what year/s did you do the placement(s)? How old were you?

What is your current level of education and in what subject? What was your level of education at the time of travel?

What project(s) were you working on?

Where else have you travelled (before, during and since your placement)?

**About your experience (focuses on images and impressions):**
 How did you hear about volunteering abroad (brochure, study abroad fair, website, etc)?

What attracted you to the activity?

Did you have any contact or experience with the destination culture(s) prior to travelling?

What are your most significant recollections about preparing for your trip?

Did you research your destination country before travelling? If so, what sources did you use?

How did images (photographs, illustrations etc) factor in to your preparation? Do you recall any specific images that led you to investigate volunteering abroad?

Prior to leaving for volunteer work, how did you imagine your destination country/region/community?

Did your experience in your destination country/region/community match your expectations? Why or why not?

What did you imagine your role in the destination country/region/community to be?

Did your experience match your expectations of your role?

Can you recall a favourite image of your destination country/region/community? What key images do you associate with your destination?

Did you travel within your destination country? Did you see your voluntourism experience as a holiday or vacation?

What does international volunteering “look like” to you? What does it look like based on your knowledge of and experience with the industry now? How would you change it?
In voluntourism now, do you think your individual experience and identity (cultural, racial, gender, anything) are represented in voluntourism advertisements?

**At home in Canada:**
At home in Canada, do you live in an urban, rural or small town setting? What about your hometown?

How would you describe your community with regards to multiculturalism? (If in Kingston, how do you describe Kingston?)

Had you any experience with cultures different from your own (at all) prior to travelling?

If I say “Canadian multiculturalism” what comes to mind?

What if anything does being Canadian have to do with volunteering?

What if anything does being Canadian have to do with travelling abroad?

**General:**
Overall, how did you feel about your experience volunteering?

Would you do it again? Why or why not?

Is volunteering abroad important to you? Is it important in general? Is it useful? Is it valuable? Why or why not?
Appendix II: GREB Approval

February 17, 2011

Ms. Ellyn Clost
Master’s Student
Department of Cultural Studies
Queen’s University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6

Dear Ms. Clost:

GREB Ref #: GCUL-006-11
Title: “Voluntourism: The Visual Economy of International Volunteer Programs”

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “Voluntourism: The Visual Economy of International Volunteer Programs” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCP’s) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, if applicable, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available on webpage http://www.queensu.ca/oro/researchethics/GeneralREB/forms.html - Adverse Event Report Form). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects to the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensu.ca/oro/researchethics/GeneralREB/forms.html - Research Ethics Change Form. These changes must be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca prior to implementation. Mrs. Irving will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, PhD
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c.c.: Dr. Lynda Jesup, Faculty Supervisor
Dr. Richard Day, Chair, Unit REB
Danielle Gugler, Dept. Admin.

JS/gj