Macquarie University

Jane Hanley

International solidarity, volunteer tourism and travel writing: Mexico and Central America in Spanish and English

Abstract:

This article discusses the intersection of ethnographic, reflexive and anecdotal styles in travel writing produced out of contemporary international volunteer tourism, and analyses the impact of volunteer tourism on the production of a narrating subject and on the representation of host communities. The comparison of a primary work in Spanish (Herminia Esteban's 2004 *Un viaje solidario*) with one in English (Cate Kennedy's 2005 *Sing, and Don't Cry*) allows us to better understand the specific historical, cultural and linguistic dimensions of different routes and encounters, as well as travel writing's potential – and its limitations – in expressing a broader critique of global inequality. The texts are analysed to foreground the quotidian aspects of mobility and degree of authorial transparency regarding the terms under which volunteer activities take place. Extending from this analysis of the authors' reflexivity, awareness and expression of critical engagement, the article explores the nature of representation in the narration of encounters between privilege and poverty, and frames these in relation to the ethical dimensions of contemporary practices of solidarity-based volunteer travel.

Biographical note:

Dr Jane Hanley is Senior Lecturer in Spanish and Latin American Studies and Interim Head of the Department of International Studies: Languages and Cultures at Macquarie University, Sydney. She investigates topics related to travel and tourism, migration, and past and present popular culture in Spain and contemporary Mexico within broad research areas including travel writing, transnational cultural production, and gender in Spanish-language popular culture. Her current research project is on the influence of transnational mobility and networks in different genres. She serves on the Editorial Committee of the *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*. Recent work has appeared in the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, *New Cinemas* and in *Transnational Literature*.

Keywords: travel writing – volunteer tourism – narration – solidarity

Introduction

Travel writing is an intrinsically compromised genre. As a form that represents experiences of mobility, it has traced histories of imperial expansion and reproduced colonial discourse. In the present day, these tracings may be less apparent, as travel writing aligns with other supposedly light popular genres and travel itself is situated as a lifestyle product. The disconnect of travel and travel narrative from political and economic power is ultimately just that: appearance. Tourism is an omnipresent global industry, and the stories we tell about travel still provide a window into the ways ideas about place are coupled to ideology and money.

Travellers with critical takes on globalisation and inequality, writing with genuine desire to serve the complex lives of their hosts and the challenges they face, nevertheless perform one of the fundamental contradictions of our world system: the profound disjunction between voluntary mobility and involuntary immobilities and displacements. Their stance as authors is, therefore, political, since it relates the cultural context of their origin to their authority to describe their destination. Not only are volunteer travellers still participants in global tourism, by narrating travel they also contribute to the global economy of images of place. Volunteer tourists may be buying into the authenticity myth of going off-the-beaten track for transformative experiences; this *is* a myth, however, and the travel writing produced is on the same spectrum of 'surrogate tourism' (Holland & Huggan 2000: 8). Both volunteer tourism and writing arising from it begin already entangled with geographies of privilege, but from at least a nominal interest in justice. To understand how it can serve consumption rather than solidarity, volunteer tourism should be understood as a cultural practice that is very frequently centred on self-growth through the development industry. Within cultural practices of volunteer tourism, we can identify cultural scripts (neo-colonialist metaphor, aestheticisation) that intervene in the production of experience as narrative. Interpreting volunteer travel writing that ostensibly springs from solidarity, therefore, brings together parameters of evaluation from tourism studies – the economics and ideologies of international mobility – with critical concepts from travel writing studies.

Solidarity-based volunteering, along with other contemporary niches of so-called ethical tourism (but unlike such niches as culinary or heritage tourism), begins from an already politicised position, even if only at the baseline level of objecting to poverty's hardships. Is it possible for alternative modalities of cross-cultural encounter to disrupt the established profit-oriented modes of industrial tourism, even while utilising its infrastructure? Critical studies of solidarity tourism highlight the importance of genuine transnational networks of resistance and sustained engagement (e.g. Scheyvens 2002; Fennell 2006; Higgins-Desbiolles 2008). Very short encounters mainly enhance traveller life experience, and altruistic modes of volunteering may naturalise inequality. Thinking through this framework, then, politicised travel writing should demonstrate the features that make international volunteering effective. These include: sustained engagement and ongoing learning post-

return; linkage to political action; and incorporation of modes of representation that denaturalise poverty and mobilise structural critique.

Contemporary travel writing, especially in a cosmopolitan voice, is a 'site of struggle' between established imperial masculinist subjectivities and a liberal vision resisting colonising modes (Lisle 2006: 69). Cosmopolitanism complicates regimes of otherness, but tends to avoid violence against the dominant order; its complications are mild and retain latent appeals to a universalism that emerges from global elites. The resistance to imperial discourse is not entirely successful given how travel writing still depends on the perpetuation of cultural difference. The discourse around the volunteer tourism industry echoes travel writing's more neo-colonial discursive modes: linking development to temporality, naturalising inequality, assuming individual choice, and perpetuating binaries between privileged self and suffering other. While reproducing authenticity myths, solidarity travel writing will often foreground unsettlement through the traveller's confrontation with poverty, and unsettlement is one potential counter to both the traveller's subjective authority and their stable interpretation of the world. The critical potential of the text depends on how travellers negotiate that unsettlement through structural critique. As a long-form autobiographical genre, travel writing has scope to capture additional aspects of touristic encounters that may escape interview and survey-based ethnographic studies. This facilitates expanded analysis – considering culture, biography, individual resources – that Nepstad (2004: 18) has suggested may provide deeper insight into the origins and evolution of social attitudes and their connection to political action. Here we see part of the value of a comparative travel writing analysis. A book must have a selling point, something to distinguish it from the information glut. For contemporary travel writing (except in the case of the most established authors, whose names alone sell), this is often the promise of difference. The subject positioning of the author in relation to that difference has consequences; are culture of origin and self also others, and difference produced intersubjectively, or are representatives of the destination culture primarily objects of the authorial subject's gaze and interpretation? In the case of volunteer tourists, the reader becomes potentially complicit from the first in the equation of poverty/oppression with difference/authenticity. 'Literature affects us, insofar as it excites the passions; it also has certain effects on us, namely our reform or betterment. What comes together here are two poles, one to do with aesthetics, the other with ethics' (Littau 2006: 89). Leisure reading, like leisure travel, has become associated with interiority and self. Considering the intimacy of reading, and the emotional experience of travel as transformation of self, do they inevitably remain conservative consumerist behaviours located in individual feeling and choice, or can they, as in prior conceptualisations of reading, move us, through virtue, to action?

Linking affective dimensions of writing – and travel – with the aesthetic shows how the encounter with poverty provokes discomfort, and from discomfort, distancing strategies. Mostafanezhad (2013: 150-1) locates one in volunteers' descriptions of poverty as 'authentic and cultural', a post-political foreclosure of radical resistance, legitimising individualism and the moral responsibility of non-government actors. Aestheticisation marks the volunteer

tourism experience as acting upon the self, affectively, such that emotional intimacy displaces history and politics. Critical tourism studies also critique this form of emotional response, which may primarily manifest in additional consumerist self-performances, such as through fair trade purchasing or inefficient international aid (Vrasti 2011; Mahrouse 2011). Where affect displaces politics, it situates the significance of mobility within volunteers' emotions, as biographical ornament; the kind of locus of desire and identity construction described characteristic of many testimonial modes of politically-motivated travel writing (Moynagh 2008). However, even Mostafanezhad's critical interpretation of this tendency suggests a potential for disruption, for an alternative aesthetics 'that addresses rather than overshadows the structural foundations of global economic inequality' (2013: 162). Travel writing by volunteers might suggest gaps in the aestheticisation of poverty, where it vacillates or breaks down under structural criticism of global economics and self-critique of complicity in systems of dominance and oppression.

In investigating such vacillations and breakdowns in volunteer travel writing, I take Mexico and Central America as notable destinations for several interconnected reasons. First, the region's tradition of politicised and solidarity travel, both from within Latin America and by outsiders, in relation to revolutionary histories and radical resistance to imperial and neo-imperial agendas. Second, proximity to Anglo North America supports travel accessibility, and provocatively co-locates Global South and North. Third, Latin American countries are among the most significant case studies for the rise and weight attributed to non-government organisations and social movements filling gaps in social services following neoliberal cutbacks and externally-imposed austerity conditions, shifting responsibility to non-state actors and to individual altruism in accordance with free market ideology (Vrasti 2011; Almeida 2007).

International volunteers interpret and narrate these changing conditions according to their expectations and desires. While Australian Cate Kennedy volunteered to go anywhere, and ended up in Mexico by chance, Spaniard Herminia Esteban was drawn along semi-willingly by her partner Fede's strong desire to participate in an international humanitarian aid project directed through existing networks within the Red Cross. As a result, Kennedy's trip is marked by a sense of both contrast between cultures and discovery, whereas Esteban's carries a mostly-implicit charge related to the ongoing cultural and economic significance of Spain as an actor in Central America, as well as the different travel experiences facilitated by shared language. Focusing on these two authors also foregrounds the significance of gender in volunteer tourism. Most travel writers are still (white) men, but volunteer tourists are more often women (as, indeed, women are more likely to volunteer in their home country, according to the 2014 Australian and 2015 Spain census). This links solidarity travel to gendered discourses around care, and the significance of affect, since writing emotional response also intervenes in culturally gendered authorial voice.

Cate Kennedy's *Sing, and Don't Cry* (2005) narrates a mid-nineties stay in immediate post-NAFTA and post-Salinas de Gortari Mexico. Kennedy and then-partner Phil worked, through a placement brokered via Australian Volunteers International, at the Unión Regional de Apoyo Campesino (URAC), a micro-credit organisation in the central state of Querétaro.

The book mingles aspects of diary and essay, and Kennedy is transparent in indicating that it was partly reconstructed from letters and emails. Herminia Esteban's *Un viaje solidario* (2004) covers the author's work (alongside companion Fede) with the Spanish Red Cross in Honduras in 2002, principally in areas around San Pedro Sula on projects related to the ongoing recovery from 1998's catastrophic Hurricane Mitch. It is an epistolary text addressed to 'Olga', with an anecdotal style that corresponds partly to the Spanish-language tradition of the *crónica*, a form of situated reportage that focuses on the informative relating specific incidents, rather than atemporal ethnographic description. Bringing works from distinct genre and cultural traditions into conversation with each other highlights, for example, the function of perceived exotic distance (the idea of Mexico in Australia) versus the linguistic and cultural proximity of Central America for Spaniards, with its underlying charge of historical culpability and imperial heritage. Both exoticising and domesticating modes of description may connect present and historical injustices, but through different cultural codes of understanding. By taking an Australian 'New World' and a Spanish 'Old World' author, different frameworks for understanding imperialism and decolonisation intervene.

Gaze and self-reflection in volunteer travel writing

In transforming oneself into a writer of place the tourist also assumes the authority to communicate something about life there, however limited the claims the writer makes to understand it in depth. To be publishable – and legible – as a travel narrative about Mexico, it is semi-inevitable that *Sing, and Don't Cry* reproduces tropes about Mexican culture and the touristic sense of place. These range from the bone-thin street dogs, plastic refuse, quotidian police corruption and omnipresent retro music to more typically picturesque reflections on the Día de los Muertos, festivities, superstitious mysticism, and syncretic iconography (19, 88, 115, 231, 50, 190). One such passage describes the neighbourhood *tortillería*:

> Inside, apart from the conveyer machinery, the scene is medieval. Men with huge sacks of corn on their backs tramp in… On the counter, a set of scales weighs up the stacks and stacks of tortillas every shawled housewife and shy little girl is buying. (Kennedy 2005: 128)

The typical spectacle of cultural difference is leavened by historical, economic and nutritional information that lessens the distance between reader/writer and observed other. The *tortillería* is connected to feminism and domestic labour, to family budgets, class markers of accompaniments served alongside the staple, government price control, scientific research on the nutritional properties of corn, food imports, and sociolinguistic significance.

Though this interlude is accompanied by some nuanced contextualisation, there are a number of moments early in the book which might lead us to expect a fairly uncomplicated use of the other to provoke reflection on the self and the home culture, including imperialist discourse which positions the supposedly simpler or less developed cultures as the source of

potential renovation to the decadent West. When Kennedy asks, for example, 'How did we get this so wrong?', she is creating a binary between an apparently ingrained Mexican hospitality, humanity and generosity of spirit and a suspicious, isolated, materialist and spiritually bereft Anglo culture (48). This, and other similar passages, in which she laments that 'We have forgotten how to laugh … to be … alive' and wishes us to 'have the grace, like them, to forget about poverty and celebrate something rich', constitute the kind of scripted aestheticisation of poverty that reduces the host culture to fount of renovating energy for touristic anomie (31). 'Westerners in a group of strangers are flinty and cold as a bag of marbles' and tourists shuffle 'blank-eyed off the tour bus and into the kiosk and souvenir shop, shooting suspicious glances' (111, 51).

Despite these Mexi-typical longueurs and jabs at Anglo atomisation, Kennedy's folkloric expectations are regularly punctured in a variety of ways: the interweaving of US culture in Mexican daily life (114); the provision of Vaporub when she and Fede had worked themselves up to expect some traditional herbal cure (150); or disdain encountered when using Halloween traditions as a bridge to understand Day of the Dead preparations (233). Her text is more open, not wholly in the established style in which an ennui-ridden and anxious wealthy white person goes on a journey of rejuvenation and self-discovery. Gaps, contradictions and subjective unsettlements mark places where more powerful critique slips in. Her personal complicity – and ours, as her readers – is not allowed to disappear under a wash of folkloric charm and righteousness. From the first appearance of inverted commas around 'working' to describe her volunteering stint and her quick realisation of the burdens she may in fact be imposing on her hosts as a 'useless gringo', we begin to realise Kennedy's more ambivalent take on the nature of encounter in the context of volunteer tourism (7, 41).

Kennedy writes that 'learning hurts'; it is bruising to 'greet the fact that we don't know' (92, 103). She tries to foreground the knowingness of her hosts in contrast to her own ignorance, framing the whole experience as 'nothing I am capable of expecting' (27). Of course, this inversion is still from Kennedy's perspective. This kind of mirroring, done badly, might result in what Youngs describes as a kind of 'cross-racial ventriloquism' (2002: 164). We have, after all, no evidence that the locals see Kennedy as looking 'grimy and rumpled and unkempt', the way she suddenly sees herself in the face of local standards of self-presentation and formality of dress (52). The solidarity traveller's gaze is not reciprocated on the same terms; we are not reading a reflective memoir by a denizen of Tequisquiapan cataloguing the recreational and volunteer tourist parade. Nevertheless, traces of reciprocity imply what Maoz (2005) has termed the 'mutual gaze', in which gazes are interrelated and affect each other as they are enacted. In *Sing, and Don't Cry* tourists become the entertainment: 'They sit watching activity around them as if the locals are their show, not realising they're the show for the locals' (264). The way Kennedy presents this inversion is not with disdain for tourists in order to distinguish herself as a true traveller, reproducing an absurd but persistent dichotomy that contributes to authenticity myths. She knows she is one of them. When Phil joins in on some costumed clowning 'people had to sit down, they were laughing so hard', and even a full year later an old man comments to her that this year's

clowns were good, but 'last year, there was this huge tall foreigner among them … he was bloody hilarious' (220-1).

Tourists want to spectate – and the impulse to stay on the sidelines is one Kennedy feels herself – but spectators 'reduce ourselves to being nothing but the passive consumers of other people's lives, as if they were some kind of commodity' (266). This is not an act of self-congratulation over willingness to find their 'place' and dance, make fools of themselves to amuse their hosts, or even self-congratulation at the act of dedicating a long period to volunteer work, but rather a reminder that we all have to think deeply about what our 'place' is, not just in the moment, but in the complex network of global capitalism. To do so involves battling our own pieties: 'we've been conditioned to associated this lawlessness and lack of accountability with social breakdown', but works to find instead a kind of learned flexibility and resourcefulness (61). The necessity of operating in the present in a state of toleration of uncertainty, negotiating setbacks on an interpersonal human scale is humbling to an Australian's 'need for control' (70). This, however, does not link culture to poverty as a producer of virtue, but recognises exchanges based on horizontality and mutual assistance are partly a product of lack of agency: 'a heavy price to pay for equality … people resolve conflicts because they have no other choice' (136).

A marked inversion, cutting close to her sense of self and the boundaries Australian women most pride ourselves on defending, is her struggle to suppress her instinctive feminist superiority, and 'tolerate, silently, the idea that you are to be pitied' for a childlessness you have chosen (99). If left at this, Kennedy's self-reflective critique would advance *Sing, and Don't Cry* only partway towards the intermediate step of promoting consciousness about the ingrained modes of thought that sustain domination and oppression. Self-reflection alone is virtue-signalling, situating the significance of the encounter in affect. However, nuanced observation and self-critique provide a ground from which to make broader structural critiques of global capitalism's local consequences and link these to the complicity and defensive self-image of global elites, as shall be outlined in more detail in the following section.

In Esteban's *Un viaje solidario* Spanish imperialism intervenes, though shared language also opens up new possibilities. The trajectory of Esteban's trip itself is influenced by the historical role of Spain in Latin America, via the substantial aid projects the Spanish Red Cross has in the region as well as the knowledge Hondurans have about Spain and Spaniards – radically different to the limited extension of details about Australia in Mexico, where the US mediates ideas of the Anglophone world. There are two main consequences which arise from this markedly different intercultural dynamic. The first is positive, influenced by cultural-linguistic similarity between Spain and Honduras. In comparison to Kennedy's otherwise much more critically-engaged work, Esteban is still less likely to reproduce cultural binaries that echo colonialist discourse. Kennedy, partly to facilitate her more ambitious economic analysis, refers to large categories that suggest the West vs the rest/third world (a problematic distinction, particularly limited in its relevance to Mexico). Esteban, on the other hand, takes her experiences in Honduras (and Guatemala) more individually

rather than as cultural evidence, which tends to reduce the possibility of aestheticising poverty.

Interpersonal anecdotes and intermittent self-parodying tone of *Un viaje solidario* create a useful specificity against neo-colonial binaries and aestheticisation of poverty. The book is not free of tropes, however. The inconvenient aspects of Honduran life are marked as premodern – a bank is 'prehistoric', a fearmongering sermon makes her feel 'as if we were in the middle ages' (56, 218). When she makes descriptive generalisations, they fall into the vein of typical aestheticisation of poverty: 'Honduran people are hardworking, resigned and suffer their difficulties stoically … simple, polite, patient' (236). However, Esteban doesn't over-state the linkage between these positive characteristics and the (forced) simplicity of the lives of most Hondurans. Her analysis of violence identifies it as structural, the product of a minority response to very extreme economic hardship (237). The people are 'the same as you', with their capacity to survive conditioned primarily by the fact that each day they became poorer, with less work and low wages, rather than any cultural saintliness (81, 106). She even recognises that her interpretations of what she learns are being influenced to some degree by 'European patterns' of thought, with the resignation of Honduran people to tragic experiences not innate or cultural, but learned in response to poor services and insecurity (137). Despite the aestheticising rhetoric above, in the mechanics of interpersonal negotiations (even neighbourly suspicions) she finds Hondurans to be much the same as Spaniards (124) – a connection reinforced by frequent light-hearted references to Honduran passion for FC Barcelona.

Most destabilising for readers, given the positive potential of cultural-linguistic proximity and Esteban's occasional efforts at tracing systematic injustice, is the often unreflective switching from this empathetic interpretation to a much more stereotypical nostalgic touristic gaze. Nostalgia suggests that destinations used to offer some untouched authenticity that has now been contaminated by global modernity (Lisle 2006: 217). In contrast to the picturesque performative indigeneity in Guatemalan tourist destinations like La Antigua, which Esteban absorbs with uncritical pleasure, 'For us, Honduras had lost its identity… Nobody dresses in a way that recalls their traditions … the establishments are aseptic, like any modern place without identity' (164). They actively avoid the famously insecure city of Guatemala and stick to highly touristic routes (which as Esteban herself observes, Honduras simply does not have on the Guatemalan scale), but Esteban does not communicate much awareness that she is not comparing like with like. Her observations are not grounded in a critique of colonialism in general and certainly not of Spanish Empire in particular, nor significant engagement with the multilingual and multiethnic complexities of contemporary Central America.

The second main consequence of her specific intercultural dynamic suggests why that lack of historicised reflection is problematic. Esteban uses her 'Spanishness' as cultural capital, explicitly and directly as well as in more subtle ways. The primary example is when, at the behest of Honduran colleagues, she goes to see two mayors to expedite the release of some information that they need. 'When they find out you're Spanish all the doors open up' (202). While acknowledging her colleagues' irritation at her intervention's effectiveness after their

fruitless efforts, she finds herself satisfied with having been able to 'help', without interrogating why. It is near this point we read one of her only contemplations of the heritage of Conquest, when she reflects on a common perception of Spaniards as great thieves and whether Spanish influence has contributed to both disorganisation and secondary grey economies; however, she leaves the thought with a simple 'I could not answer' (200). This lack obscures links between the historical conditions which brought about globalisation, and contemporary erosion of national sovereignty, inequality and aid dependency. Overall, Esteban's book reproduces a hopeful narrative about humanitarian aid and the capacity to give which rarely raises larger critiques of the conditions which make it necessary. Naturalisation of development-oriented international aid relations reinstates the Global North as altruistic and the Global South as incapable of solving its own problems, a complicit foundation for mobility which guest-host interactions in volunteer tourism encounters must therefore work to overcome if it is to have some hope of establishing networks built around principles of genuine equality and exchange (Sin 2010).

Structural critique and humanitarianism

In addition to participating in the tourism industry, volunteer tourism is embedded in the global humanitarian aid economy. As mentioned, humanitarianism is often framed in terms reproducing North-South relations of inequality, including using neo-colonialist language that emphasises helping and potentially aestheticises poverty. Humanitarian discourse often constructs a 'miserabilist' vision of the Global South designed to trigger affective engagement linked to the mission to fundraise; relations of equality that locate solutions in local self-determination don't open wallets (Fueyo Gutiérrez 2002). Solidarity travel and some aid activities purport to be part of an alternative globalisation that creates potential for resistance to global neo-liberal capitalism, however the degree to which these global connections constitute a genuine alternative and site for resistance is variable.

Kennedy's extended passages on inequality might lose impact if merely intercalated with folkloric stereotypes about the humanity and hospitality of Mexican people, since the latter naturalise – or even valorise – poverty as a condition connected to virtue, and injustice reads as interpersonal rather than structural. Interpersonal injustice might be ameliorated by altruism, whereas structural injustice requires radical change – potentially very uncomfortable change for global elites. The equality we exalt as the pillar of democracy in the world's wealthiest countries is an illusion, dependant on the fact that, as Kennedy writes 'some of us, obviously, are just thirty five times more equal than others,' since 'a couple in the US having two babies is about the same as a couple in India having seventy, or a couple in Ethiopia having one thousand' (224). This is not precisely an argument for environmentally-motivated childlessness, but rather pushes back against discourses which situate global problems in the Global South (overpopulation) and solutions in the Global North. Kennedy documents transnational seasonal employment, internally displaced economic migrants, and the rise of women-only towns, and brings these daily realities for Mexicans home to consumption habits around imported flowers and fruit, highlighting

economic interconnectedness rather than reinforcing cultural difference. The section of *Sing, and Don't Cry* entitled 'Medicina' is medicine for the reader, in which the author explicitly links the struggles of the poor to the wilful blindness and self-delusion of the global rich (herself and her readers). She starts gently, with our habit of 'blithely presenting multiculturalism as food' while being silent about everyday racism (154-5, 157). '[W]e pay a kind of shut-up money to keep all of this stuff out of our line of vision', advancing equality in the restaurant but not in the workplace or the street (162, 163). It is in this section that Kennedy really begins to tackle head on the pointed question that structures Claessen's 2018 take-down of the inefficiencies, corruptions and delusions of international development: *Who are you and why are you here?* This is a question that cannot be adequately answered, in any politically satisfactory way, without interrogating responsibility at all levels: individual, corporate, national and global (Mowforth et al 2007).

Early on, Kennedy (40) describes the radical peer transparency required for functional community micro-credit to function, confronting the realisation that Australian norms of silence about money are a privilege afforded by being among the wealthiest people in the world. The smallest interventions to counter poverty exist within a pragmatic community context as well as in the face of enormous macro-economic forces and climatic disasters which can at any moment throw projects into chaos. Poverty alleviation, she learns, is extremely complex: 'usually, they already know perfectly well how to fish. The problem is they can't afford to buy a rod, or the river's polluted with effluent, or the fish are full of mercury, or their government's deregulated the fishing industry. *Who do you think you are, anyway, some expert on fish*?' (93, emphasis added). Simplistic solutions are a form of moralising paternalism that shifts responsibility to the disenfranchised to acquire skills and make better choices. Kennedy juxtaposes her urge to 'put my hand in my pocket and "solve" this problem' of families being able to afford minimal school supplies, or absurd lectures she gives as part of nutritional education programs about 'foods they've barely seen, let alone could afford', with her discussion of macro factors like IMF conditions and the scale of US foreign debt (133-4). This is a method of linking local action and host community experience to structural critique of the effects of global capitalism: 'Pull a thread somewhere … and you see the stitches being dropped in a big snarled web' (93). Structural adjustments and state retreat celebrated by neoliberal orthodoxy have increased inequality and class polarisation in a range of Latin American (and other) countries (Veltmeyer et al 2016; Silva 2009). While statistics are 'blunted of their horror', Kennedy finds evidence of this decline in the children's measurable weight and disrupted families: 'They're too thin. Their fathers aren't around. Their mothers save thirty cents a week' (166). This affect-aligned poverty stereotype is balanced by a broader query: is it, then, that Mexico is poor? 'No, respond the campesinas, Mexico is rich' – in resources, but only its capitalist oligarchs and corrupt political elite normally benefit (167). She traces the chain of consequences of structural changes that have transformed a previously rural and agricultural lower class: small-scale farmers are displaced into industrial or migrant labour, allowing the United States to subsidise US farmers, transforming Mexico into a food-import dependant country, driving up hunger, rendering workers more vulnerable to wage drops and casualised labour markets (168).

These critiques are effective, but it is difficult for travel prose to entirely escape neo-colonialist discourse. For example, she suggests aspects of mystery and the primitive when writing about syncretism and religious devotion, noting that 'it's hard to believe you're at the cusp of the 21st century', a typical reproduction of temporal linearity which equates putative development with reason and secular culture and relegates underdevelopment and faith to the past (183-4). She also exhorts us to both 'savour … your luck' and open our eyes to 'what might potentially nourish us. The New World.' (165, 164). To the book's credit, however, the answer is not to rejuvenate ourselves spiritually following the model of a supposedly more authentic and humane aestheticised 'Mexicanness', but rather to fight against the illusion that macroeconomics are beyond our control; the scale seems impossible, but we are not, Kennedy reminds us, similarly fatalistic about crime or disease (171). While struggling to direct her own action – 'I falter in my perseverance … I can't penetrate the political payola system' – she also makes concrete claims. Claims against, for example, Australia's risible foreign aid budget, with its own neoliberal logics, cuts to which mean volunteering trips like hers will no longer take place (172). Claims against racist scapegoating in US political discourse, while that country's standard of living depends on seasonal migration and cheap imported labour (173). Claims against tourists themselves, including herself: 'the privileged consumer on the end of all this economic wreckage', who may spread money around or buy 'ten pesos of salved conscience', but who *cannot* tackle chronic poverty and oppression through altruistic consumption (200).

It is here Kennedy arrives at the sharpest deconstruction of the failings of an affect-driven interpretation of volunteer encounters: 'My chest is squeezed with sorrow … I struggle to hide it and reposition myself on another kind of interpersonal exchange that can go beyond stark economic disparity… *We kid ourselves that this is possible*' (201, emphasis added). Feeling is the easier terrain. Tourists 'deflect attention from the thing itself back onto more familiar territory – themselves' (200). Here, Kennedy herself is turning a critical and analytical eye on affect and aesthetic distancing. 'I want to … not be swamped by sentiment that makes me useless… We can't cry for millions, so we cry by ones' (206-7). 'Wealth will warp all our intentions', she writes, pitiless about our self-delusions in reducing ethics to lifestyle (207).

> We're swamped with comforting insurance policies, with statistics and mission statements written in a language that flatters us, tells us we are going to "foster" change and "embrace" paradigm shifts in community development. (211)

She deconstructs humanitarian aid discourse that naturalises North-South inequalities. What must give is the principle that 'choice' (through consumption) is a right, and the 'market' offers solutions; the very logics of global capitalism (290). Ethical lifestyles and ethical consumption are methods of assuaging guilt. What does a genuine alternative globalisation mean? '[U]ltimately, travel "alternatives" require transformation of the very conditions in which travel is pursued – a travel activism interested in unlearning its leisured privileges and working for its own demise in a new travel for all' (Hutnyk 1996: 222). Politicised solidarity means identifying volunteer tourism within a leisure economy that depends on the involuntary mobilities – and immobilities – of others.

Un viaje solidario is almost entirely devoid of such direct ideological critique, and oblique at best about historical and contemporary forces shaping global inequality and sustaining injustice. Esteban has little to say about the implications of her presence – or that of Spanish Red Cross workers in general – in Honduras or the dynamics of power, politics and economics of humanitarian aid. The book's strengths are in its quotidian testimony, which give a much more apparently artless chronicling of the embodied experience of travel and the effects of the temporal coincidence of solidarity and tourism. Esteban makes frequent reference to their careful planning to ensure they could undertake their solidarity activities and their tourist excursions in one itinerary without either interfering with the other. This alternation, however, evokes for readers the stark contrast between the forceable displacements of the poor, both large, such as those caused by natural disaster, and small, like daily long commutes or all-day mobile vending, and the agency implied by selecting itineraries and means of transport for one's personal edification. The author is particularly interested in detailing the travails of bus travel, from small shared vans through larger yellow school-style buses servicing urban routes through San Pedro Sula through to the first-class air-conditioned services she and Fede rely upon for longer distances, preferring a frequently mentioned local coach company with its air conditioning and television. In the more permeable, inexpensive transport, vendors and musicians enter, and operators hustle to attract passengers to the point of over-crowding their driver-owned bus. While the author details these aspects of daily life on the move in Honduras for the interest of her reader, there is a frequent undertone of discomfort and fear (particularly with regards to the questionable skill and accelerated pace of the drivers). Present also is latent distaste at the chaos or 'anarchy of objects' and the dirt, disorder and violence (62, 115, 90), contrasting only with the beauty of nature (reproducing the colonialist imagery of New World abundance). This reinforces the safety of home, tracing what Lisle describes as a modern cartography dependant on a dangerous and unclean 'elsewhere' (2006: 137).

Leisure mobility is used as a distraction from poverty and insecurity – an emotional medication Esteban acknowledges (while also requesting an actual anti-anxiety/insomnia medication), commenting on the way they would take refuge in their host's house in a safe neighbourhood, or in pleasant restaurants, without remarking much on the insulating nature of touristic experience and the wealth it signals. Another day she distracts herself by going to a Woody Allen movie (158) and planning her next recreational excursion. Esteban's close observation of details of the day-to-day mechanics of travel and the physical encounter with place does, however, reveal the intersection of macro and microeconomics of both the tourism and aid industries, and brings home the extreme income inequality that is one of the factors marking Latin America's importance for understanding the implications of contemporary volunteer tourism. Where Kennedy mentions gated communities mainly in the context of expatriate retirees and the spectacle of wealthy tourists (both international and domestic), Esteban goes into more detail about and has personal contact with elite strata of Honduran society. She goes with some 'upper-class women' to the 'riverside shanties' where they carry out their charitable projects (154-5). The precarious dwellings are part of a 'ring of misery like those that surround large third world cities', which faces on the other side of

the river 'houses of insulting luxury' (156). In a trip to Tegucigalpa they attend a party with a government minister (having already encountered another ex-minister in a museum) as well as the President of the Honduran Red Cross, and in general their positions as foreigners (and Spaniards in particular) facilitate a degree of cutting across class useful for readers – though it has little in common with the extreme class polarisation in which Central Americans live.

Where *Un viaje solidario* touches some of the same themes as *Sing, and Don't Cry*, it is clear how the two authors differing cultural and linguistic knowledge and underlying ideologies frame their interpretations of what they observe. To take the example of woman-headed families, while Kennedy connects this mainly to transnational economies and migration, with only fleeting mention of alcohol abuse and domestic violence, Esteban enters into intimate cultural analysis and storytelling of women's experiences. She returns again and again throughout the book to the solitude of Honduran women, eventually arriving at concrete documentation of 'other wife and also various children' which individual men produce, entrenched 'machista' attitudes, intergenerational sexual abuse, contraception resistance, and epidemic teen pregnancy (230). Perhaps Kennedy's disinclination to make moral judgements as an outsider stayed her pen – she is similarly reticent about cock fighting, a 'stubborn' cultural tradition she describes as a 'blood sport', with colourfully graphic imagery, but without ever conveying much sense of her personal feelings (221-2).

Both authors reproduce discourses of 'otherness', but Kennedy also makes trenchant structural critiques, while the intimacy of Esteban's quotidian, interpersonal orientation and cultural proximity afford a specificity and space for host subjectivity that counter some unreflective aspects of her touristic voice, occasionally allowing the reader to breach tropes of aestheticized poverty. The closest Esteban comes to breaking down the structural aspects of global inequality nevertheless stays in the realm of affect: 'joy for what one has and on the other hand, remorse, because deep down we know that if there are so many people living in such conditions, and even worse, it's because all of our surplus in the closet, in the fridge or in the house is what others lack … and we do little or nothing to fix it' (157); affect can trigger action, for the volunteer tourist as for the reader of travel narrative, but whether this action constitutes solidarity or conscience-soothing altruism depends on its terms. Despite this manifestation of the frustration and impotence that characterises the experience of many volunteer tourists, the book ends with a victory, reinforcing a positive and celebratory image of humanitarian aid (and the Red Cross in particular, which situates *Un viaje solidario* partly within the circulation of pro-fundraising publicity) when the town the organization constructed for some Hondurans displaced by Mitch is complete. It 'looked like a mock-up for a Disney film' and when the families were able to move in 'it was unforgettable to see the joy of the people as they loaded their belongings … on their way to a world full of colour, in contrast to the grey and huddled life Mitch had submerged them in' (147, 255). Even here, a hint of complexity creeps in, thanks to a dining experience at a luxury hotel that allows readers to once again glimpse the extreme degree of inequality in Central America – and international aid workers at least partial alignment with the privileged side of that inequality.

Travel writing, which draws on experiences of volunteer tourism, brings the disparity between leisure mobility and involuntary displacement and immobilisation into relief. It has an intrinsically political dimension which authors must navigate whether they make it explicit within the text or not. The ways extreme economic disparities are negotiated by travellers and hosts can serve to reinforce the neo-colonial aspects of humanitarian discourse and naturalise North-South binaries. However, long-form narrative also opens possibilities for authors to conduct critical self-reflection and provoke readers towards insight into the everyday challenges and means of sustaining networks of resistance and alternative globalisation. Writers prepared to genuinely question both their role and their actions in undertaking volunteer tourism, and who is responsible for the kinds of inequalities they encounter, may find ways to move themselves and their readers from generosity and self-ornament towards politicised solidarity, even if, as we have seen in these two examples, the reliance on cultural binaries and the reproduction of colonialist discourse is extraordinarily difficult to escape.

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