Imagining, Constructing and Reifying Disability in Volunteer Abroad: Able Global Citizens Helping the Disabled Southern Other

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ABSTRACT: In this chapter, I argue that the ways in which disability is constructed and produced through encounters in volunteer abroad (VA) programs function to (re)produce a caring and benevolent able-bodied Northern global citizen. This subject formation relies on two main processes: (1) the creation of the able/disabled binary: the volunteer/the beneficiary and (2) the obscuring of the role the Global North (the place from where the volunteer comes) plays in producing impairment. The research presented in this paper is from a larger study theorizing encounters with Southern disabled others. Here I engage in a qualitative textual analysis of Projects Abroad, a large VA organization based in North America that provides international volunteer placements to young people from Canada and the United States. I consider how the lack of analysis of Global North/Global South power relations reproduces depoliticized and ahistorical approaches which individualizes and pathologizes disability, and subsequently obscures any analysis of the geopolitical-social production of impairment and disability. I end the paper by asking how we can invite Northern volunteers to engage in more inclusive ways, and in a learning that destabilizes hegemonic narratives of disability in this space.

Introduction

An example pre-departure activity designed to prepare Northern volunteers for living abroad provides the following instructions to participants:

“Welcome to your volunteer abroad program preparation! We are going to start today with a group exercise to teach you about how hard it is to live abroad, and all of the difficult things you will need to negotiate. You will be out of your comfort zone, you will
be far from home and things will be difficult! Now, get into a pair with another participant. Make up a sound that will serve as your signal to each other, like clapping your hands or whistling. Each pair must have a unique sound. Now put on these blindfolds!”

The facilitator hands out blindfolds. She then separates each pair, placing them in strategic locations around the room, leading them through the objects strewn about, making sure partners are as far apart as possible. The facilitator instructs the pairs to use their sound, and only their specific sound, to find each other.

“No peeking… Go!”

Participants then attempt to move through the room, blindfolded, making their designated sound to find their partner.

This is one of many exercises designed to teach Northern young people embarking on experiences abroad about the difficulties of leaving home and going over there. It operates on the following logic: acquire a sensory impairment, then navigate a disabling built environment with your newly acquired impairment. The impairment is the location of difficulty. By acting out impairment, Northern secondary or post-secondary students are asked to consider how hard it will be to live abroad. The script on impairment/disability begins here. Until I engaged in studies of disability from a critical place, I engaged in this type of cross-cultural animation activity. I always felt uncomfortable doing so, but until I was introduced to Critical Disability Theory, I did not have the language to express why. These types of exercises are ubiquitous in this field, and often elicit powerful responses from students. They are designed to do so. They are also deeply embedded in individual and medical understandings of impairment and disability, and they invite students to engage with disability from this perspective.

In this chapter, I argue that the ways in which disability is constructed and produced through encounters in volunteer abroad (VA) programs function to (re)produce a caring and benevolent able-bodied Northern global citizen. This subject formation relies on two main processes that are reproduced through mainstream VA experiences: (1) the creation of the able/disabled binary and (2) the obscuring of the role the Global North plays in producing impairment. With this in mind, I ask the following questions in this chapter: How are encounters with the disabled Southern others1 presented to young Northerners when they participate in VA programs? How do young people understand and represent these encounters and what narratives about disability are reproduced? And lastly, how do these representations and understandings inform binaries of able/disabled and assumptions of who needs help and who is entitled to do the helping? The disabled body is often imagined in VA programs as a fixed object, requiring the charity and pity of the Northern

1 I have chosen to italicize other throughout this chapter. I do so in order to the highlight the word as othered from other words, as a small attempt to highlight the process of othering in this space.
volunteer. It is through this imagined relationship or dynamic that Northern volunteers enact their neoliberal subjectivity as benevolent caregiver.

The research presented in this paper is from a larger study theorizing encounters with Southern disabled others. Here I engage in a qualitative textual analysis of Projects Abroad, a large VA organization based in North America that provides international volunteer placements to young people from Canada and the United States. It runs specific programs placing North American volunteers with disabled people living in the Global South. In the larger study, I focused my analysis on Projects Abroad’s mission statement and marketing, with specific attention to how the organization presents its programs that address disability. I studied the organization’s website to see how the organization invites young people into these programs, the language used and any age limits, qualifications or prior training they require. I further analyzed the reflections from past participants featured on their website, understanding these as representative of larger institutionally held beliefs. These participant reflections demonstrate the ways in which Projects Abroad chooses to market their programs to young people interested in an international volunteer experience. They also highlight the ways that young people are told they should or could engage in these programs. I understand these reflections as intentional representations of the kind of experiences Projects Abroad is selling.

This chapter will explore how the subjectivity of the benevolent Northern helper manifests in encounters with the disabled Southern other. I consider how the lack of analysis of Global North/Global South power relations reproduces depoliticized and ahistorical approaches which individualize and pathologize disability, and subsequently obscure any analysis of the social production of impairment and disability. VA programs individualize disability through helping, curing and rehabilitation narratives that position Northern students as subjects who can intervene in the lives of certain Southern bodies, to perform affective tasks (Andreotti & de Souza, 2012; Angod, 2015; MacDonald, 2016; Mahrouse, 2010, 2015; Vrasti, 2012). The “care” experience begins, and ends, with the person who has an impairment: the solutions are individual and there is no analysis of how Global North-driven processes of (neo)colonialism, imperialism, transnational capitalism and other state interventions produce impairment in the South in non-natural ways. Absent is an analysis of how those with impairments are disabled by a system that is intimately propped up by those in the North.

I organize this paper by first outlining the theoretical framework that I employ in my analysis and providing brief discussion of Critical Disability Theory for readers who may not be familiar with this emerging field. Next, I take up disability and disablement in the Global South, drawing attention to the production of impairment and the erasure of alternative disability politics in the Global South. I then provide real-world examples of encounters with the Southern disabled other in VA, by analyzing the work of Projects Abroad. I end the paper by asking how we can invite young people to engage in more inclusive ways, and in a learning that destabilizes hegemonic narratives of disability in this space.
Theoretical Framework

How the concepts of “disability” and “impairment” are being used here is essential to this research. I understand both terms as fluid, constructed, influenced by context and culture, relating to neoliberalism and systems of power, and in constant flux and shift. Each of these frames are addressed in this chapter. Goodley (2011) makes known the uneven and contradictory nature of disability, explaining that it is more present in geographical spaces which experience poverty, violence, conflict, malnutrition and child labour, but also everywhere because of a rise in the pathologizing of disability in medical and public discourse. In terms of the distinction between impairment and disability, I employ the definition first proposed by Disabled Peoples’ International (DPI):

Impairment: the functional limitation within the individual, caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment.

Disability: the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of community on an equal basis with others due to physical and social barriers. (DPI, 1982 as cited in Goodley, 2011, p. 8).

In this early conceptualization of disability and impairment, “disability is seen as resulting from practices of structural, social and attitudinal impediments to the full inclusion of people with impairments” (Goodley, 2011, p. 1391). Scholars in the field of Critical Disability Studies are pushing this understanding further, taking up the ways that impairment is constructed and changing, using Foucauldian analysis. They posit that all “biological facts” have been constructed/moulded over time by institutional and discursive forces, arguing “impairment and disability are two sides of the same socially constituted coin” (Goodley, 2011, p. 115), and calling attention to the non-natural production of impairment through conflict, environmental degradation and the violation of human rights, as well as highlighting the Global North’s role in this production (Soldatic, 2013).

Critical Disability theory is a helpful framework to examine VA programs that send young people from the Global North to volunteer in communities in the Global South. The subversiveness of Critical Disability theory, with its roots in Critical Theory and dialectical thinking, are a natural framework through which to examine issues of who is valued, power and narratives of “helping” or “curing” that are inherent in many VA programs. This analysis is also embedded in the material structures of inequality and the process that produce impairment and disability. For a long time, injustices done against people with disabilities were seen as legitimate social processes necessary to protect or to care for them (for example large institutions, asylums and hospitals built to house people with disabilities). Critical Disability theory brings important critical areas of thought and discussion to the field of critical theory. It challenges emancipatory theories to transgress boundaries/borders/limits by pushing foundational thought around rationality, normalcy
and a myriad of other constructions. It challenges any path to social change to be truly inclusive, and exposes the ways that people with disabilities have historically been excluded from the organization and living in society.

Critical scholarship on VA is robust (Andreotti, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016; Heron, 2007; Jefferess, 2008, 2012; Mahrouse, 2010; Tiessen & Huish, 2014; Vrasti, 2012) but thus far no researcher has specifically used a critical disability lens to study VA, including positing disability as a site of difference and oppression in these experiences. The intersection of disability and VA has yet to be taken up, and the implications on subject formation and reproduction of disablement and the hidden sites of production of impairment necessitate this critical inquiry. Narratives around helping, curing and rehabilitating are strong in the marketing of these programs, and also damaging for how they construct disability as an individual problem, further reproducing charitable and medical models. Instead of valuing or complicating difference, this system reproduces subjectivities that essentialize difference (Tarc, 2013). How does one’s desire to “do good” maintain the hierarchical relationship that reproduces disablement and individualizes disability? In order to shift the way young people engage in VA opportunities, stronger engagement with critical and intersectional analysis is needed.

**Disability and Disablement in the Global South**

Meekosha (2008, 2011) tells us that approximately 66% of people with disabilities in our world live in the Global South, and that this number is likely larger due to underreporting. She fleshes out the link between disability and poverty in the Global South and highlights the tendency for those in the Global North to attribute this to exotic natural disasters like tsunamis and earthquakes. Meekosha highlights “the role of the global North in ‘disabling’ the global South,” through systems of colonialism, imperialism and globalization (p. 668). Gorman (2010) uses the example of Haiti to analyze the production of impairment through Global North interventions into Southern spaces, and the system of economic, social and political disablement that is subsequently produced. Gorman highlights a core critique of the disability rights model—a model which positions justice for those with disabilities as a matter of human rights, not charity or something to be granted benevolently, but a matter of rights enshrined in the various UN Conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). She asks the critical question of who is responsible for guaranteeing the rights of people when one state intervenes in another state’s affairs, such as when Haiti signed over control of its main airport to the United States following the massive earthquake in January 2010. She asks whether the extraterritorial control of the airport by the United States military meant they are responsible for the impairments and deaths caused by subsequent delays in medical aid arriving from international NGOs. The narratives around disability most prominent in international reporting on the earthquake were tales of disabled people as “being at risk in the context of an ableist culture and an inaccessible built environment” (Gorman, 2010, p. 4). These narratives made no mention of the role of the Global North, specifically the
United States, in the production of impairment, obfuscating the role of imperialism in causing disablement (p. 4). Similar questions can be asked of transnational mining corporations in the South, which use toxic pesticides and cause environmental devastation to water, land and farming practices. These transnational corporations produce impairment in non-natural ways by harming the environment, causing problems to agricultural production that result in malnutrition, and fueling conflicts that impair local communities. They further refuse to protect workers’ rights when they are exposed to harsh chemicals and unsafe working conditions (Connell, 2011; Meekosha & Soldatic, 2011).

Soldatic (2013) takes up the World Health Organization’s *World Report on Disability* in her larger critique of the problematic relationship between the Global North and South. She argues that the report leaves no room for alternative disability politics, a politics articulated and driven by disabled people, first articulated by Oliver (1990) as a social model of disability. As I move through this chapter, I demonstrate a similar reproduction of disability among individuals featured in VA recruitment materials. Young Northerners travel to the Global South equipped with an already ingrained framework for how to relate to the disabled Southern other; they come with the desire to help, to fix and to rehabilitate. Any alternative for how to function outside this “helper/helpee” framework is erased in VA recruitment materials; alternatives are seen as suspect, as asking too much. The relationships built on this tacit agreement of who is helping who becomes strained when the unruly disabled body moves outside this script. VA programming responses to disability are steeped in neoliberal language; by this I mean they focus on individual rights, which may sit in opposition to how the host culture responds to disability or impairment. Experiences of impairment might not be disabling in certain cultures or subcultures, yet these local norms are erased in Northern VA programs and recruitment materials (Berghs, 2015).

**Encounters with the Southern Disabled Other**

I now turn to analysis of the typical ways that encounters with the Southern disabled other are constructed and presented by a large North American VA organization, Projects Abroad. I analyze the language Projects Abroad uses to market its programs and any qualifications or prior training they require volunteers to have. I further analyze the reflections from past participants featured on their website, understanding these as representative of larger institutionally held beliefs. I understand these set of discourses as reflective of the “desired” VA experience. This research involved qualitative textual analysis of promotional materials and website used by Projects Abroad to market their programs.

Projects Abroad is based in New York City and Toronto. It claims to be “the world's leading international volunteer organization,” with over 600 staff members and has sent more than 100,000 volunteers abroad to date (Projects Abroad, 2016). The sheer size of Projects Abroad, their ubiquitous presence on university campuses and their focus on care-centered programming led me to focus on them as an important presence in the VA field.
On the Projects Abroad website, volunteer projects are organized by age of the volunteer, desired length of placement (from 1 week up to 12 weeks) and by category of volunteer activity. Opportunities to work with people who have disabilities can be found under all age categories, under short-term volunteer placements and under the imagined activity of “care”. The role of the volunteer is described as “assisting with caring for children and others in need of support at orphanages, day cares, kindergartens, special needs centres, elderly homes and other care facilities. Requirements: None” (Projects Abroad, 2016b). The prospective volunteer then chooses, in this generic “care” category, from the different projects organized by country. Therefore, the potential volunteer is assumed to be making their choice by first wanting to do “care work” and then choosing where geographically that work will take place.

I will now analyze one country example, Argentina, to illustrate what a typical care placement entails. The call to action for potential volunteers is: “Volunteers are needed in children’s homes and special-needs centres. You may be asked to help with a wide range of activities, from assisting the staff with basic care duties to playing with the children” (Projects Abroad, 2016c). The length of placement can be as short as one week and Projects Abroad states, “All we ask is that you have energy, enthusiasm, and a commitment to seeing the work through” (Projects Abroad, 2016c). Entering into institutional care homes for children has no age restrictions and requires no special training, police checks or previous experience. When describing the kind of work this placement entails, Projects Abroad is very careful to mention that this placement will cater to the preferences of the Northern volunteer: “You will also have some time to spend one-on-one with individuals at your placement, helping them with basic education or activities of your choice,” and “There are some opportunities to get involved in physiotherapy sessions and help with necessary daily exercises. It can make a huge difference for these individuals to have your attention, support, and friendship, and you will quickly find that you are an integral part of the staff team” (Projects Abroad, 2016c). The programming is structured to ensure maximum enjoyment and personal development for the Northern volunteer. The centrality of the volunteer self in these encounters works to erase the historical forces of disablement, rendering the Northern self the ultimate caregiver or saviour of the disabled Southern other (Chouliaraki, 2013).

One reflection posted by a Northern volunteer who previously engaged in this experience is telling of this larger narrative that caters to the preferences of the Northern volunteer, and the use of disabled bodies to construct that caring and benevolent volunteer identity (Jefferess, 2012):

I learned quickly what "making a difference" really is. In Bethel Children's Home (or in any care placement), that is seeing love sliding off of you and onto the children, pouring onto them what they need most and lack of volunteers from Argentina and international alike do not offer that to them. The kids' vibrancy of love back onto you reflects that love, and that is how you can tell how much you are giving them. Making a
difference in the short term falls into that, and making a difference in the long term...that comes with making promises to the children that you won't forget them, that they aren't just a phase of your life where you were giving and then didn't look back...that you will either return to see them, or follow up on seeing how they are doing, or try to give more to the organization in some means. This is how I feel, at least... I spent about 4-6 hours a day at the placement, walking about the quarters and playing with whichever age group I desired, merely playing or helping with the lessons in the “jardin” (pre-school) for the youngest children in the home... Everyday on my walk home, I thought of how little I had actually done but of what a huge emotive exchange had passed between the children and me (Projects Abroad, 2016C).

Here we see this Northern volunteer imagining that she is uniquely placed to give love to the children with disabilities that no other local volunteer can. Particularly telling here is that she sees her work as filling a void unfulfilled by local staff and services and suggesting that Argentinians do not do this work. She imagines her work as making a difference without any context of existing national support and services. Research has shown that short-term volunteer work with vulnerable children, where short-term manufactured attachments are encouraged, actually worsens the effects of institutional care (Richter & Norman, 2010). Yet this volunteer highlights her ability to move in and out of each institutional care space, stating that it was based solely on her desire to do so, and not the needs of the children she worked with. This is troubling, as the bodies she was caring for are rendered fixed to the institutional space, making her choice of movement ever starker by comparison. The volunteer expresses amazement at a very troubling common narrative from volunteers in these spaces; that there was little done in terms of work, but the experience was emotional. Would this be acceptable in a pre-school or school for children with disabilities in the North? Would we accept that while no learning was accomplished, at least there were many emotional exchanges? This volunteer ends with her reflection on becoming an unofficial Argentinean—here we see the total erasure of class, race and global structures of power, including colonialism, all of which just disappeared as she magically became Argentinian, when she wanted, for as long as she wanted; all her choice. Research by Mahrouse (2010, 2011, 2014 and 2015) yields similar findings.

Projects Abroad uses a clear script in their marketing to volunteers, one in which the Northern able-bodied volunteer will bring joy, care, love and enrichment to the lives of the disabled Southern other through activities like holding hands and sharing a meal. The Projects Abroad website even goes as far as to say that this will break down stigma against people with disabilities in the community. The depoliticization and individualization of disability shown here creates a dangerous narrative of how bodies are imagined, what they need and how they must be disciplined. The Southern disabled other is imagined as passive, in need of care, and only able to a lead a fulfilling or happy life through the agency and benevolence of the Northern volunteer. The Southern disabled other is
imagined as a passive recipient of care, waiting for someone to touch their hand and awaken their joy. They are imagined to be welcoming of this encounter, which will remove all barriers to a more whole and worthwhile life. This imagined disabled other does not have agency and is not imagined to want anything more than love and attention. There is no room for alternative ways of imagining, constructing or resisting disability, and certainly no room for imagining disablement as being about human-made systems or politics. The processes underlying colonization and neo-colonization are intimately tied to disability and the production of impairment, but volunteer encounters as presented by Projects Abroad do not make space for engaging in an analysis of alternatives or the role of Northern volunteers in these processes. The able-bodied Northerner is constructed as being uniquely placed to help the Southern disabled other and not as a benefactor of the very systems that create disablement. No self-reflexivity is required on the part of the Northerner. They remain innocent; simply there to help the poor disabled other. The body of the disabled other is there to care for, to fix and to give enrichment, hope and joy to the Northerner, producing their subjectivity as a caring global citizen.

The Northern volunteer is framed as a powerful expert with the ability to help. They are able-bodied and ascribed a legitimate right to intervene. Conversely, the disabled other is imagined as pliable, fixable, willing, and importantly, grateful for this intervention in their lives. There is no space for alternative ways of being, embodied experiences, narratives or politics. Far from being naturally occurring, it is problems like war, armed conflict, capitalism and climate change that produce impairment (Soldatic, 2013). The Global North is intimately involved in the production of impairment and disablement in the South. This subject formation works to do specific things; it erases the possibility of a disabled volunteer from the North, since the Northern helper is necessarily constructed as the able-bodied caregiver. What happens when the Northern subject is disabled and engages in the space of VA? Is their body seen as unruly, disruptive or unwanted? This subject formation also erases the Southern other with an impairment who does not identify as disabled. The able/disabled binary at play does not leave room for these alternative subjects or ways of being. It erases any space for an alternative disability politics to be imagined or worked towards.

Mainstream VA programs are situated in an individual model of disability, one that provides no structural analysis or moves to acknowledge the structures that create disablement. The invitation to this specific encounter does not allow for North-South partnerships or agency, and places the onus on the other to help the Northern volunteer unlearn this framework, labour that is unfair and onerous (Heron, 2011). The disabled body is imagined as serving the educational and personal development of the able-bodied Northern volunteer, whereas the disabled other is a passive recipient of care. The disabled body is the perfect site on which to project the helping and caring narrative; it is an unruly body in a chaotic and exotic space, in need of the loving and joyful (read: civilized and enlightened) affective touch and disciplining of the capable Northern volunteer.
The able/disabled binary produced by mainstream VA programs invites Northern volunteers into an innocent script where they are invited to engage with an individual construction of disability; vague references to stigma and lack of resources are masked by the more forceful narrative around helping the Southern disabled other through holding their hand and giving them joy. We see the reproduction of this narrative through Northern volunteer reflections, with one young person understanding herself as the only actor uniquely equipped with that which is needed, that is: “Seeing love sliding off of you and onto the children, pouring onto them what they need most and lack of volunteers from Argentina and international alike do not offer that to them” (Projects Abroad, 2016c). The able/disabled binary, the erasure of the production of impairment and the individualization of disability work together to produce a caring and benevolent Northern subject. One who brings joy and love to those who have no joy or love, and one that can move in and out of geographical spaces, spaces that are de-politicized, de-historicized and function as a space of learning and enrichment for them, subjecting certain bodies to policing, interventions and care dictated by the desires of the Northern able-bodied subject.

**Invitation to Unstable Learning**

The question then becomes, how do we make known the blurriness of the able-bodied/disabled binaries produced in this space? How can educators make known the processes of disablement and production of impairment in the South that are fueled by our consumption and way of life in the North? Could this be fertile and revolutionary ground for the deepening of learning in this field? The main question for the field of VA is how we can get students to understand that “global poverty is not distant; it is a part of everyone’s daily existence” (Jefferess, 2012, p. 37). Mahrouse (2010) makes known the importance of a larger, structural analysis in international volunteer learning programs: “Perhaps most importantly students need to notice how our involvement with social justice activism obscures our complicity in current power imbalances and allows us to conceive of ourselves as innocent” (p. 183). How can we make known that the food and the clothes produced in the South are all done so under conditions that produce impairment and disablement, all in order to satisfy the capitalist consumption of the North? How can we make known our complicity in this production of impairment and disability? How can we make known to Northern volunteers and students who will complete their VA experiences in these very places that they are not separate from these processes, and engage them in critical self-reflection and a willingness to stay in that difficult learning space? How can we make VA a less disabling and ableist space? The problematic discourses surrounding disability are entrenched and normalized; therefore, our work must be transdisciplinary, collective and critical. We must engage in hopeful and sustainable ways, carrying VA into new and radically inclusive possibilities. I end here with a quote from Judith Butler on engaging anxiety. Butler asks how, as educators, do we invite students in VA programs to:

[Open] up the possibility of questioning what our assumptions are and somehow encouraging us to live in the anxiety of that questioning
without closing it down too quickly? Of course, it’s not for the sake of anxiety that one should do it…but because anxiety accompanies something like the witnessing of new possibilities (in Salih & Butler, 2004, 333).

This is the difficult work of engaging Northern students in difficult learning, asking them to stay in the space of anxiety to possibly witness new possibilities, inviting them into the space of learning as “contextual and difficult” (Andreotti, 2001, 21). An embodied anxiousness as a space that opens participants of VA up to deeper learning, more complex learning that values different ontologies.
References


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