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Embodied experiences in international volunteering: power-body relations and performative ontologies

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Abstract

In this paper we debate the interpretation of embodied experience on international volunteering placements. Drawing on six in-depth interviews with volunteers recently returned from Northern Thailand, we document the affects and emotions that play a key role in the formation of volunteer-host relations. We then present two interpretations of the data, conceptualising power-body relations in two different ways: from power's affective and emotional literacy, to the body's autonomous capacities. With these two interpretations at hand we then consider the performative nature of academic labour and make the case, following the work of feminist geographers J.K Gibson-Graham, for a research praxis that does not set limits on subjectivity but rather excavates – and writes into being – the possible. We therefore argue for a conceptualisation and interpretation of embodied experience in volunteering as a site of potential transformation and transcendence of the inequalities that otherwise set the conditions of the volunteer-host encounter.

Key words: volunteer-host encounters, interpretative practices, development, power relations,

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Introduction

What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning
Heisenberg, 1955

This paper is based on six in-depth interviews with international volunteers conducted shortly after their return to the UK from short-term placements in Thailand. We sought to examine three themes: i) the affective and emotional experience of volunteer-host encounters; ii) volunteer-host encounters against uneven North-South power relations and iii) the conceptualisation of the body in interpretative practices. The interviews evidence that volunteer-host encounters rested quite heavily on intersubjective embodied experiences. In existing literatures on encounter, the meeting of privileged northern constituents with (relatively) poor southern 'Others' ranges in effects from 'uneven merging', whereby inequalities permeate meetings (see Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014), to 'meaningful contact', tied to increased respect across difference (e.g. Valentine, 2008). Recognising the body's importance to encounter, research on international volunteering and embodied relations offers an analogous range of interpretations: from 'poor but happy' rationalisations (Crossley, 2012), neoliberal affective economies of subjectivity (Vrasti, 2011; Mostafanezhad, 2013) and 'paternalistic' relations of care (Sin, 2010), to emergent 'shared aspirations for social justice' (Crabtree, 2008), awareness raising (Hanson, 2010), transformative learning (Brown, 2015) and even 'transcendence' of uneven structures of power (Griffiths, 2014a). There are significant political implications for these interpretations that contribute to ongoing and overarching debates in international volunteering to do with, prominently, the processes of neoliberalisation, neo-colonial presences and practices and the continuing commentary on self-altruist motivations and outcomes (see Devereux, 2008 for an overview). Through these debates, we learn much about the political economy of international volunteering and relations of the body to power, but we also find the body's encounters, to draw on Heisenberg, ontologically consistent with the interpretative practices of research.

A key reason for such differing readings of intersubjective encounters in international volunteering is, quite obviously, different fields and methodologies that yield varying datasets with varying interpretations of volunteers' embodiments. On the one hand this is reflective of the messiness of the field, but it is also indicative of the ordering required for data to serve as a means to the end of publication. As a consequence, researchers routinely silence themes and alternative readings, such that similar data is framed as, for example, subordination to and transcendence of neoliberal affective economies (*cf.* Mostafanezhad, 2013; Griffiths, 2015). In a sense this reveals research on volunteering to be consistent with that in the broader discipline of geography (and the social sciences in general) where researchers are engaged in understanding attempts to 'manipulate' the 'dynamism' of the body (Clough, 2008) while also recognising the 'autonomy' of the body's intersubjective capacities (Massumi, 1995). In another sense, in the documenting of alternatively delimited and uninhibited bodies, there arises a question to do with the conceptualisation of power-body relations in the ontologies of interpretative practice. The answers we take from the world can never be fully dissociated from the questions we take to it, and those questions are temporally and spatially situated (e.g. Haraway, 1988) - and, therefore, politically performative. In sum: the doing of research weighs politically on the stories we tell.

In this article we draw focus on our interpretative practices, seeking to deconstruct the process of writing data. To this end, we take our lead from feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham whose work consistently explores approaches decentred from 'capitalocentric' approaches where dominant forms of power orientate research agendas (2005; 2008). They advocate a 'performative ontological project', whereby academic writing presents an 'ethical opening' for researchers to 'explore rather than judge' and, in so doing, 'giving what is nascent and not fully formed some room to move and grow' (2008, p. 620). As the discussion of the data develops here, we draw this interpretative practice together with the idea of 'methodological humility' (Law and Singleton, 2005), resulting in a paper that at each turn attempts openness to the choices we make in the discussion of the data from the interviews. We seek to lay bare this process, opening ourselves up to different perspectives and engaging these with Gibson-Graham's performative ontologies. The main purpose of the article is to contribute to a discussion of research praxis, all the time taking seriously the performative function of knowledge production. We argue for making research in the area of volunteering and development sensitive to the nascent political potentials of the body and open to a world that both records and evokes difference.

The article proceeds in four main sections. We first give an account of the methodology, introducing the concepts of 'methodological humility' and 'performative ontologies'. The second section presents the ways that volunteers recounted their relationships with host communities. The data forms a story of bodies meeting and communicating on non-verbal channels, the resulting relationships, the data evidences, rest on affective and emotional exchanges that passed between bodies on placement. This brings us, we argue, to a crucial point in the interpretation of the data: should we take as axiomatic the body's inter-subjective faculties as 'autonomous' (e.g. Massumi, 1995), or are we to read embodied experience within 'neoliberal affective economies' (e.g. Vrasti, 2011)? Recognising the conceptual, methodological and political weight borne in analysis, in the third section we offer two readings of volunteers' embodied experiences in forming bonds with host communities. We conceptualise the volunteer experience in different ways and consider the importance of different interpretations of the data. In the final section we weigh up the political implications of different readings, making the case that power – however imagined – should be carefully configured in its relationship with the field in the process of writing research. This final section articulates our central argument: we cannot order life solely within fields of power, the world is messier (and always potentially better) than that and our work should reflect this.

1. Methods

The interview data presented here serve as an example of research into volunteers' experiences of international development placements. They are primarily used to illustrate the ways that our interpretative practices impact heavily on the processes of knowledge production. The intention, however, is not to be self-referential; the data also contributes to our understanding of the embodied experiences the volunteers describe and the importance of this for relationships they form while on placement. With such a small sample, we make no generalisable claims. Indeed, specifics such as destination, pedagogies and longevity of placement are (amongst others) important factors in volunteering's staging of the North-South encounter (for example: Brown, 2015; Simpson, 2004). Rather, we show that these embodied relationships can be highly significant to some volunteers, from there our analysis examines how researchers' interpretations of the data can then take these experiences in different directions, for which we draw on relevant research literature to situate and complement our data. We draw extensively on other literature on international volunteering and relate our analysis back closely to other empirical studies, allowing a reciprocal interplay to lend the study potential relevance for future research in the

field of international volunteering and beyond (Yin, 2009). Nevertheless, we recognise the limitations of a small data set, and we are clear that our objective is not to make sweeping claims.

The research was conducted with the collaboration of a small international development organisation with three members of paid staff in the UK office and a team of Thai water engineers based in Northern Thailand. The organisation works to improve water access for the Karen Hilltribes, an ethnic minority group 'forgotten by the Thai government' (Alexander, volunteer), living near to the Myanmar border. On placement, Thai and Karen engineers lead the water installation projects with teams of local villagers and small groups of international volunteers, whose pre-departure fundraising finances their participation and the materials for the project. The volunteers spent two to four weeks on placement and lived and worked with the community. The six volunteers we interviewed all travelled during the summer of 2014, three in July and three in August. In both cases volunteers were housed within the local community, either with a host family, or in the local school. For each volunteer, their integration with the local community was – by most standards – considerable, since, not being a large group of outsiders, they not only worked but ate and socialised in the community in the evenings.

All the volunteers were British undergraduate students aged between 18 and 21. They formed part of a team of between eight and ten young people working on one of the water projects in one Karen village and were all recruited from one Higher Education Institution in the UK. Originally all eight students travelling from this institution were recruited for the research project, and pre-interviews were conducted to understand the students' original motivations for volunteering. While these pre-departure interviews informed our questions and gave an insight into the volunteers' expectations, this paper draws primarily on the post-placement interviews. Due to two volunteers extending their time in Thailand, the sample for post-placement interviews was reduced to six. With these volunteers we conducted in-depth interviews, exploring the ways that the volunteers talked about their experiences. It became apparent quite quickly that a central theme emerging from the interviews was the volunteers' relationships with host communities. The extended interviews were adapted to focus more on these relationships and allow us to probe further the influence of these experiences on their perception of the placement as a whole.

The interviews were each recorded digitally and transcribed professionally. They were then thematically coded. Themes emerged in terms of notions of development, learning and personal change, and the emotional weight of the experience. In terms of development the data

was coded into expressions of orientalism (Said 1978), understandings of inequality, perceptions of charity, influences of globalisation and challenges to prior notions of development. Learning and personal change was coded into personal connections and enrichment (for example, 'CV building'), openmindedness, confidence, life expectations and realisation of privilege. Emotions were coded to fear and intimidation, nervousness, alienation, tiredness and exhaustion, pleasure and enjoyment, excitement, joy, fun, passion, awe, humility, nostalgia, attachment and sadness. These were cross referenced with indications of their embodiment in terms of crying, smiling, laughing, singing, exchanging looks, shaking, and absorbing smells. The bonds and relationships with the local community cut through all these themes and became a central aspect of the analysis, along with the emotional expressions of their experience.

It was clear in the interviews that the volunteers – each of them – considered their relationships with host communities as the defining aspect of their placement, one volunteer, for example, recalling 'how tight we were, how deep, how massively it has affected me' (Beatrice). The importance of these relationships and being able to 'form such close bonds' was emphasised by each of the six respondents as 'really really special' (Laura). In analysis we found that the volunteers' conceptualisations of their relationships with host communities resonate with a large amount of already-existing work on international volunteering. This work, as we make clear here, articulates varying and contradicting relationships to power; we attempt to reflect this by presenting a "mess" of alternative readings. This lays bare, we believe, researcher interpretative practices; that it involves a series of choices, silences and emphases. Our attempt here, therefore, is somewhat contradictory; while we aim to be transparent in our use of apparently contradicting data, we nonetheless argue that – given the impossibility of transparency – our research agendas and practices might demonstrate an ethical openness to different interpretations and be guided by alternatives rather than status quos.

We thus take our lead from notions of 'methodological humility' and, subsequently, 'performative ontology'. In the first case, humility, as it is set out by John Law and Vicky Singleton, situates the researcher(s) within the production of knowledge with the imperative to concede - embrace even - that 'method is an ordering that makes otherness' (2005, p. 349). In this view, writing, therefore, is a process of choices whose performativity renders methods political: 'the enactment of different *realities* … methods are never innocent and that in some measure they enact whatever it is they describe *into* reality' (Law and Urry, 2005, p. 397, p. 403, original emphasis). In their address of this methodological issue, we find the writing of J.K.

Gibson-Graham most persuasive. They advocate an 'anti-capitalocentric' research praxis in which difference, not dominance, becomes the focus of analysis with the objective 'to uncover or excavate the possible' (2008, p. 623). In this study, the practical implication of adopting this approach is that while we recognise different readings of the data are plausible (and publishable), once we recognise the performativity of our research outputs, it is politically productive to, as Gibson-Graham put it, 'become open to possibility rather than limits on the possible' (2008, p. 614). In an extended conclusion we return to this issue and make specific conceptual, ethical and epistemological arguments that, we feel, add weight to the methodological imperative to explore and write difference into being.

2. Affective and emotional volunteer-host relations on placement

As Beatrice entered the village she recalled 'lots of smells, the heat was unbearable … it was all so exciting'. Her senses were heightened such that she 'can remember it really vividly': the 'low feeling' from having no sleep instantly transformed as she began her placement. Laura, sitting next to Beatrice, was similarly struck: 'it was breath-taking'. Alexander, then also freshly arrived, had his first meeting with some people in the village, it's not entirely positive: 'a lot of them just didn't seem to really interact with us, they just looked away', a long pause: 'they didn't smile at us'. The body's absent performances here set him uneasy; unreturned smiles left him 'intimidat[ed]', it's 'scary'. The lack of a common language marked each of the volunteers' meetings with the hosts, and although each group would make attempts to learn words of the other's language, this was a source of embodied rather than verbal communication through laughter - 'they'd laugh at how we were saying the words' (Laura). In fact, 'whenever we tried to communicate we wouldn't bother with words' (Harry); few phonemes would ever pass between the two groups. This would never change but that awkwardness would, slowly retreating to the recollections of those early meetings. By the end of the placement Daniel noted that 'they always treated us with excitement and interest', for him 'show[ing] that language isn't essential for a friendship' (Daniel).

The volunteers spent their days digging trenches on the steep hills, their feet always vying for grip in the loose soil and their arms and torsos slowly getting used to the unfamiliar digging and hoeing movements. The gradient contorts postures; brings new sensations; new aches, pains. The Karen people were 'so practical' – 'they dig faster, they wield machetes like it's an extension of their body' (Daniel). But it wasn't easy, and the volunteers were anxious to push themselves as hard as they could 'to not be a burden' (Harry). Oftentimes they wouldn't 'get it right', these

were the low days, like for Beatrice who recounted '[one day] I felt like I was in the way, and I really wanted to help, but it was something that I wasn't' – she paused at this point in the interview, perceptibly sombre, attending to an emergent memory – 'I think it was the second or third day, and it really really got to me, I had a real sulk and I was scared, I was scared of *the slip*, but I just wanted to get stuck in'. This was a low point for Beatrice: 'I felt really really upset that I couldn't' – an even longer pause – 'that I was useless'. As the days passed, though, she learned the body movements and her 'sulk' dissolved: '[I] laughed it off' and in her 'digging team' a shared joke emerged: 'someone would fall, big scream and then they will laugh about it as they are coming off the ground'. Laura's experience was similar: 'when we were working they'd be laughing at us because we were rubbish – we couldn't use a hoe even though they'd be helping us out to learn things'. 'They' placed their hands over hers, took her through the movements, set the body to a pace that, Beatrice put quite eloquently: 'tapping with the hoe, and clunking this and that … we did feel … we were in a good rhythm'. Bodies moved in synch. The emergent scene is one of bonds forming in a shared movement – 'the actual work [as] a different way of bonding' (Sam) - illuminated by the intense sun and animated by touch, laughter and an embodied connection that cut through that initial awkwardness.

After-work time was important, too. Sam would spend his evenings 'cooking ... and just being taken from house to house, and them laughing at you'. Still few words passed between them but gestures signalled; they laughed because 'we have got fat arms' (Beatrice). They were not offended, it didn't even register as anything but a connection. While cooking the volunteers would find themselves doing 'heads, shoulders, knees and toes' and '[being] really laughed at', the choreographed arms and legs in the late evening heat was 'amazing'. Similarly, Harry 'pushed [him]self socially' because he 'was aware that no matter how hard you work, unless you have that social aspect with the villagers too there's no way that you can build a relationship'. To this end his body was the medium: 'a lot of the times even though I'm not a smoker I did stay and I smoked with the villagers because they had [cultivated] their own [tobacco] … so I tried it and the villagers were all laughing because I was [coughing]'. The laughs created something, something emergent, shared and, Harry continued, 'off the back of that they invited me down one day to have a drink with them after we finished work'. With each drink, the laughs came more readily; co-created and co-constitutive expressions of the body that connect subjects: 'the smoking, the drinking, the eating with them, the working with them… that was how they got the measure of you.' (Harry). These were important moments for Alexander too: 'it was like I managed to almost break that barrier in a way that they didn't see that divide any more'.

Inhalation, coughs, swallows, intoxication, laughs: each bodily act mediates the interaction, somehow levels the ground - makes bonds possible, reduces a 'divide'. There is a consequent closeness, Alexander reflects: 'they would laugh at us for things we did, we had no idea why they were laughing … it was just a lot of laughter'. A pause - the interviews were marked by faraway pauses - before reflecting: 'and, yeah, I think we got really close …'

As the time on placement came to an end, the body's laughs and smiles became tears and crying, this despite not one word passing between the volunteers and hosts. Beatrice recalled her goodbyes: 'nothing was said really, but the bond that we made especially with Cee … when we came to leave, she was really really upset, she was crying and it was really emotional to leave, and it was just a bond that we formed, with no words.' And for Laura, similarly, the 'close bonds' had become 'really special' - she described leaving as, quite poignantly, 'an incredibly gut-wrenching experience'. The volunteers left the hills with memories permeated by moments of connections made through laughs, smiles and tears, expressions of the body that cut through, as Laura puts it, 'different cultures'. Each day brought intense heat, sweat, aches; the will to do well, the anxiety of failure. In this way, placement presented a rich sensorium that ebbed and flowed in intensity, made experience irreducibly visceral and provided a channel of embodied communication. How we understand these bonds in the context of uneven North-South power relations remains in question, and in large part, on the interpretative frame we apply to analysis. In the following section we discuss two different interpretative frames, leading to different readings of our data.

3. Conceptualising power-body relations

With the "affective turn" the body has become an important focus of study across the social sciences (Clough 2008). Approaching this area of research involves imagining people as "fleshy" and brought to act in social relations through feeling bodies, their own and those of others. Power relations within this broad area of research differ quite markedly: from objects of manipulation to autonomous intensities, the body's faculties are understood and addressed in manifold ways. On the one hand, the body's faculties are understood as an 'object-target' of interested parties (Anderson, 2012). From this perspective, powerful actors circulate emotions and affects to 'make things happen', and work in this area recognises and explores the concepts of "neuroliberalism" (Isin, 2004), "affective governance" (Hook, 2007), "affective politics" (Ahmed, 2004; Barnett et al., 2008) and "affective capitalism" (Illouz, 2007). On the other hand, the body is conceptualised more as an autonomous actor in a field of emergent, co-created and co-constitutive affects and emotions (Griffiths, 2014a). In this sense affective life can emerge as

an 'outside', and research in this area takes seriously the 'autonomy of affect' that makes the body an 'unstable object of governance' (Anderson, 2007, p. 162; Massumi, 1995; 2002). From this perspective, embodiments cannot successfully be reduced to words, nor can they fit neatly into our preconceptions of power. Consequently, the body's affects and emotions emerge via 'intense autonomic bodily reactions that do not simply reproduce the trace of a political intention and cannot be wholly recuperated within an ideological regime of truth' (Spinks, 2001, p. 23).

Research to-date tends towards such an either/or conceptualisation of power-body relations in the volunteer-host encounter: either a 'neoliberal sleight of hand' is pulling strings (Mostafanezhad, 2013), nudging volunteers via a depoliticised aesthetics of compassion to become, in Wanda Vrasti's account, for example, 'the good neoliberal subjects' of affective capitalism (Vrasti, 2011; 2012). Or, there is an emergent solidarity through 'intense rather than superficial social interactions' (McIntosh and Zahra, 2007, p. 554) from which arise 'affective bonds [that] can transcend the subject positions circumscribed by power' (Griffiths, 2014a, p. 126). Taking our lead from these literatures and their respective ordering of "fleshy" subjects and expressions of power, this section proceeds in two parts. First we offer a 'power-centric' reading of the data that frames volunteers' emotional and affective bonds with hosts as subordinate to power, and second we attempt - following Gibson-Graham - an 'anti-capitalocentric' fidelity to the notion that the body is an autonomous site of co-created, co-constituent and emergent affects and emotions.

3.1 A power-centric reading

The data evidences a set of volunteer-host encounters that must be read alongside the conditions of continued uneven North-South power relations. For Laura, her nostalgic recollection of the village - 'when you'd come home … you'd have to have a cold shower and before you even got back to your room you'd be muddy again' – is tolerable only insomuch as it is temporary: 'at the time it was like "Oh, this is great"'. Laura continues, making it clear that any willingness to experience the conditions of poverty rests on her privileged mobilities: 'obviously if we were doing that forever then it would wear off eventually and you'd feel "Oh no, I don't like this anymore"'. As such, Laura's immersion is accompanied by international volunteers' always-present right to leave, the 'capacity to move in and out of [hosts'] social and cultural spaces' that, tellingly, is exclusive: 'they are unable to move into [hers]' (Baillie Smith et al., 2013, p. 130). As

she continues, it becomes clear too that the same privileges shape her perception of her host family whose knowledge and needs are set clear limits: 'but that's all they know so for them they have everything they need'. And these limits - inseparable from a disadvantaged position within patterns of inequality - identify and reinforce the inequality at the heart of the encounter: 'that's all *they* know and for *them* that's fine whereas for *us* the only reason that it would've got tiring is because *we* know that it's just not what *we're* used to, but *they* have the bare necessities and everything *they* need'. In this instance Laura's turn of phrase is markedly Orientalist, where 'they' are poor 'but that's all they know' in this 'basic version' of everyday life, while 'for us … it's just not what we're used to'. A clear dichotomy of us and them in which, as Kate Simpson pointed out in her widely cited study, 'poverty is allowed to become a definer of difference, rather than an experience shared by people marginalised by resource distribution' (2004, p. 688).

Despite Laura's profession that she 'will never forget [the people of the village]', they remain at a safe distance that withholds any examination of the limits and delimits she places on her hosts, again resonating with Simpson's study of a similar cohort of volunteers for whom 'poverty becomes an issue for 'out there', which can be passively gazed upon, rather than actively interacted with' (2004, p. 688). Laura, in this way, colours her claim that the break - on departure from the village - of her emotional relationships with her hosts was 'gut-wrenching'. Such viscerality, it seems at this early point, is predicated on the very inequalities that precipitate her presence in the South. Her embodied immersion into life in the village is in this way clearly marked as temporary (and, for that, more tolerable) and whatever it is that *wrenches* her *gut*, it does nothing to break quite demeaning dichotomous perceptions of the Other whose life never - and cannot - transcend 'basic needs'. In short: Laura's relations with the host community are heavily circumscribed by the co-constitutive effects of *her* privilege and *their* perceived lack.

We might also draw attention to Laura's ostensibly dismissive 'for them that's fine' - and other instances in the data such as 'they just laugh all day' (Beatrice) and 'they don't have water but they get by' (Harry) – and highlight the 'poor but happy' rationalisation that contributes to the depoliticisation of poverty in a time of 'popular humanitarianism' (Crossley, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2014). This comes to the fore when Sam reflects on what he has learnt by living so close to the host community:

> ... they do just get on with it and they just suffer ... they suffer the conditions they live in but they, there's not sort of a... I don't think they really sort of complain, they're just very happy to have an opportunity to improve it, as it were, they didn't come and show us all the water

> and, "Oh isn't this revolting?" They actually just sort of go, "Oh let's go and dig, let's go and dig!" (Sam)

There is a duality to Sam's perspective: he perceives 'suffering' [the conditions of poverty] but this is quite comfortably resolved by a concurrent perception of 'happy people'. Within his obvious and admirable respect – 'they don't complain' – there is an unthinking acquiescence to *the way things are* and the human right of access to clean water remains outside of his understanding of poverty.

The close of Sam's response is notable too for its - again, superficially admirable - determination of 'let's go and dig, let's go and dig'. This was indicative of his will to 'just get something done' and adds another layer to the depoliticisation of inequality and poverty. Poverty and its gritty realities - hunger, disease, death - are refigured through the simplistic, and 'flowery' , language of 'development challenges' that may just require some 'rolled-up sleeves' (Hintjens, 1999, p. 383). Similar sentiments were expressed amongst the other volunteers: Beatrice 'just wanted to get on with helping; Laura's 'small things … all made a difference [to development]'; and Harry 'just wanted to get there and work hard'. Such constructions of *just doing* development are highly prevalent in international volunteering and are, as Simpson notes, 'a highly simplistic understanding of development, one in which enthusiasm and good intentions are allowed to prevail' (2005, p. 683). Within these determinations to 'get on' and 'do' development is a now-too-familiar recourse to the language of helping in the articulation of volunteer work. All six of the volunteers felt their connections to the community either instilled in them or increased an existing wish to 'help' their hosts. While such motivations cannot be said to be harmful in and of themselves, they do revisit the dichotomies well articulated by Laura, above, and, more, order the volunteer-host encounter in a quite particular way, as "'volunteers" and "voluntoured" ... "givers" and "receivers"' (Palacios, 2010, p. 867). Taking this a step further, Eliza Raymond and Michael Hall, have warned that 'inappropriate roles' that arise from the imperative to help 'can be seen to represent the neo-colonial construction of the westerner as racially and culturally superior' (2008, p. 531). From this perspective, that each volunteer - none of whom have any formal development training - assumes a capacity to help and simultaneously figures development as 'help' and 'hard work' does nothing to even the ground on which volunteers and hosts meet and, again, difference remains unchallenged, perpetuated.

At hand is a volunteer-host bond whose emotional and affective base is foreshadowed by a persistent inequality between *them* and *us*. Any affection, empathy or compassion materialises as

motivations to 'help' hosts whose 'needs' and knowledge are not afforded anything beyond 'basic'. We can therefore posit that whatever the genuine embodiments felt by Alexander, Beatrice, Daniel, Harry, Laura and Sam, their dynamics follow and serve to replicate the uneven distribution of power. Wanda Vrasti and Jean Michael Montion have written quite eloquently on the 'sentimental pretensions' of volunteering whose emergence in late capitalism is invested in the 'reproduction of subjects and social relations congruent with the logic of private profit extraction' (2014, p. 338). Mobilising 'care', 'morality' and 'affective dispositions' has made volunteering for development a rich site in the depoliticisation of development and the individualisation of volunteers. They argue:

> … images of a global community of care and responsibility are invoked with no attention to transnational relations of power pertaining to capitalism or imperialism, but phrased purely in moral terms dependent upon individual enlightenment and magnanimity… this framing of the global volunteer necessarily speaks of the stratification of human life within global capital. (2014, p. 341)

Set in this instrumentalisation of life, Vrasti and Montsion elaborate, 'volunteering emerges as a useful subject-forming tool for producing the kinds of skills, emotions and normative orientations expected from neoliberal subjects' (2014, p. 338).

Bringing this back to the data here we begin to see the volunteers and their respective stratification within global capital. The volunteers - each of them - recognised that they 'learned so much' (Laura), that the placement would influence their 'career choice' (Sam) and, in Harry's words that are echoed by each: '[the experience] makes me want to go out and find a job and be able to start trying to better myself'. Harry's 'lucky' - a 'winner' in the apolitical 'lotto logic' of poverty (Simpson, 2004) - to have 'choices' and not have to become a 'farmer' like 'them'. As such, the experience 'has opened so much' (Beatrice); against continued water shortages for the Karen, such openings open for only one side of the volunteer-host bond. Each intensity pushes the body towards individualised realisation - a will to 'do better', 'work harder' – and magnanimity – a 'sense of satisfaction'; learning is, in every sense, 'all about us' (Zemach-Bersin, 2007, p. 16), all about actualisation in a competitive global jobs market.

'Individual enlightenment' and the reinforcement of global divisions, to use Vrasti and Montsion's terms, therefore circumscribe these volunteers' intersubjective connections with host communities. While encounters are very much *felt,* they are felt within the very inequalities that designate subject positions, volunteers *volunteer,* and hosts, *host*; one active, the other passive. It would be short-sighted to ignore the inherent inequality that enables and shapes the interactions

between constituents of the 'Rich North' and those of the 'Poor South', within these interactions we can and should count emotional and affective intersubjectivities that predicate genuine, yet ultimately uneven, bonds in the volunteer-host encounter. The body's faculties express themselves within constellations of power, resulting, as is in evidence here, one-way flows of compassion, depoliticised empathy and damaging Othering of those in poorer areas of the planet.

3.2 An anti-capitalocentric reading

The data evidences a set of volunteer-host encounters marked by embodied interactions that seem to contribute to more even North-South power relations. Sam tells of how the Karen people 'enjoyed laughing at our Western ways'; Harry, how 'breaking barriers' came with 'smiling and laughing and swapping words and jokes' and Beatrice recounts how initially uneven encounters 'changed massively … because it was so intense' (Beatrice). Alexander, tellingly, talks of the way he realised 'we were very similar … in a lot of ways' and, while acknowledging 'cultural differences', the newly discovered similarities cemented their relationships: 'the way we interacted with them was the way we would interact with each other also ... it was just a lot of laughter [we got] really close'. Laura similarly describes an exchange where difference - while never erased - does not present a 'barrier': 'we were able to laugh at each other but no one takes offence because you're embracing the fact that you're both from different cultures and you're trying to understand each other'. While *us* and *them* remain part of the terms of description, they are, at these points, descriptors rather than indicators of Otherness; the volunteers, while recognising differences, do not place them in a hierarchy. Instead, the subject positions ascribed by respective positions within any 'global division of labour' - the very divisions that make volunteers *volunteers* and hosts *hosts* - are loosened through the emergence of bonds we track in Section 2, above.

Such a 'loosening' is perhaps most notable in the decentring of the West as *the* referent in volunteers' understandings of development. Laura describes how placement brought about a quite significant shift, stating that 'before I went I was under this thing of 'Oh, development it's all about technology and things like that ... Oh, they have TVs; they don't need you'. Gradually, Laura continues, through 'living with my host family', her perception changed: 'now I see development as a whole other thing; it's not about globalisation, it's nothing to do with that'. Instead, Laura takes against 'our global community dominated by ... business and technology', declaring its role in development - with a fair amount of emphasis in the interview - 'completely

wrong!'. While ostensibly non-specific, Laura's change in thinking is subtle, potentially significant and recurrent throughout the data. Daniel explains that he thought TVs and phones signalled an 'advanced' village but now believes 'technology as a barometer for development' is 'completely … unreliable'; Sam had 'presumed that development was a change from that *sort* of lifestyle to the lifestyle that *we* lead … in a linear fashion', but his time on placement 'changed [his] perception completely'. Significantly, he now believes development not to be interventionist - 'it's not about changing someone's lifestyle' - but more about 'let[ting] them choose their lifestyle'.

For Harry, his body is central to his perception of development gained on placement, registering fear in his host family: 'you could see that they were scared that the livelihood that they'd had for so many years [would be lost] … because of the way things are [currently] developing' (Harry). *Felt* anxieties come to the fore here, and pass through his own body, sensing that people were 'scared' leads him to reflect:

> I didn't want that Western superiority sort of thing to come through like we've come here with the money to help you and then they view us like "thank you for the money" ... I didn't want us to get in the way, I didn't want it to be a project where they have forty villagers turning out and the staff and they were trying to do the work and we were just inexperienced and getting in the way and slowing the project down. (Harry)

Powerful critiques of development discourse highlight 'the messianic feeling and the quasi-religious fervour expressed in the notion of salvation', where 'salvation' was historically contingent with earlier civilising missions (Escobar, 1995, p. 25). Harry's labour on the hillside, his body's initial unfamiliarity with the gradient, is his 'inexperience'; his body, in this way, is at the centre of a process that decentres his superior position in, to revisit a term, the 'global division of labour':

> It's that sort of – why not just pay the guys to do it properly. They could have it done in half the time and it cost a few thousand pounds for the flight each you could just give to them as well. (Harry)

Connectedly, as Laura continues on technology she reiterates: 'it's completely wrong … you got a *sense* that they knew what to do, we were slipping on the hill [while] they knew exactly what to do', and Daniel adds: 'it was sometimes embarrassing [not knowing how to use the tools], but they were always kind to show us'. Importantly here, 'making a difference' for Harry, Laura and Daniel is made more complex; it does not depend on the simplistic figuration of 'rolled-up sleeves' and enthusiasm. Rather, the volunteers each comment on the 'ridiculous' notion that they were there to 'help' their Karen hosts or that they held 'superior' knowledge by virtue of

their Western origins. Instead, quite poignantly, through the everydayness of working with the community – the *felt* and *sensed* everydayness - a doubt and opposition emerges; they felt they had to work hard and push themselves, in a neat reversal of a the colonialist imperative 'not be a *burden*' (Harry).

Cumulatively, gently, these shifting views signal a move away from themes of 'lack' and 'economy' towards 'rights' (to choose) and a (as-yet unspecified) de-emphasis on 'growth' as measures of development. Contemporary practices of development at this point ceased to be an *a priori* 'good' and complexities and nuances emerged from their lives - and life - in the village. Development in 'a linear fashion' towards, in Sam's words, 'the lifestyle we lead' constitutes a dominant development imaginary. It evokes modernisation, the 'Western project of development' and the ordering of the world according to likeness to the West. Accordingly, closeness to the community, the 'really really special … close bonds' (Laura) seem to effect a displacement of Western perspectives, giving rise to a prominence of community-focused and non-interventionist understandings of development. Such understandings of development decentre the West as *the* point of reference and recognise that volunteers *doing* development positions them as neo-colonial 'fixers' of problems in the 'South'.

The common thread to these testimonies is an articulation of development that – albeit lightly – pushes against dominant Western-centric imaginaries of development as economic growth and intervention. We can situate Laura's, Daniel's and Sam's points of view alongside critiques and deconstructions of development where 'new nations' must follow a 'modernisation imperative' towards an unquestioned 'Western model', or as Arturo Escobar famously put it: 'if the problem was one of insufficient income, the solution was clearly economic growth' (Escobar 1995, p. 24). The claim here is not that the volunteers here take on Escobar's postcolonial critique of development, more that their reconceptualisations - however slight - are moves away from dominant imaginaries and strategies. To this day important development actors continue to laud '"The Market" as the ultimate solution (Sharpe et al., 2010), but for these volunteers the 'domination' of business is, in Laura's words 'completely wrong!'.

These knowledges veer from the status quo; the experience of living and working with the Karen community, therefore, does not simply reproduce taken-for-granted orderings of the world. There is, on the contrary, a transformative process to the ways that volunteers understand their hosts and the lives they live. The importance of such deeply emotional experiences should not be underestimated, the learning takes place at another level and they create 'a sense that we

cannot go back to the way we were before.' (Dirkx et al., 2006, p. 132). We might now begin to position the body and its competencies as central to such transformation. Carolyn Pedwell, for instance, has written quite eloquently on the affect and empathy in the spaces of development:

> [t]hrough establishing empathetic identification with those who are differently positioned to themselves, the possibility exists that (privileged) subjects will experience a radical transformation in consciousness, which leads them not only to respond to the experience of 'the other' with greater understanding and compassion, but also to recognise their own complicity within transnational hierarchies of power. (2012, p. 166)

For Pedwell, work on development and the concomitant inter-subjectivities like those documented above produce a 'radically 'unsettling' affective experience of empathy' and this, crucially, is 'potentially generative of both personal and social change' (ibid.). Returning with this perspective to the reflections above we can begin to imagine how affective experiences of volunteering may, via a 'radical transformation in consciousness' (Pedwell, 2012), play a role in alternative understandings of 'North-South' (*us-them*) relations and development. The intensity of the experience challenges prior assumptions, potentially opening the volunteers to transformational processes of learning.

The volunteers come to know intimately – albeit fleetingly – the lives of their hosts and their identification with Other subjects is, 'unsettling'. Unsettled, the volunteers reconsider the superiority that is intimately tied to uneven patterns of development (Harry); reframe inequality from 'lack' to 'injustice' (Sam and Alexander) and began to chip away at the 'us and them' dichotomies of dominant North-South development imaginaries. Cumulatively, these reframings and reconsiderations - for each of the volunteers - eschew any notions of Western superiority, allowing us to envisage the body's movements as insubordinate to circumscriptions of experience. Instead, while always conceding the ultimately unknowable nature of affects and emotions, we might wonder how each movement, each inter-subjectivity leaves 'a trace within our constitution' (Al-Saji, 2000, p. 56). Brian Massumi notes 'the body's movements [retain] a kind of depth that stays with it across all its transitions - accumulating in memory, in habit, in reflex, in desire, in *tendency*' (2002, p. 213, original emphasis). The moments shared on placement; the laughs; the breath taken; the low feelings; the hill slips; the communal reliefs, anxieties; the intoxication; looks, stares, smiles, frowns – from this perspective - are co-creative of knowledges and perceptions that do not defer to the structural inequalities that make hosts *hosts* and volunteers *volunteers*. At hand, therefore, is a body of data that lends itself to a reading where volunteers' intersubjective bonds with hosts take shape in a way that does not defer to and may

even be transcendent of the inequalities that are ordinarily understood to delineate the volunteer-host encounter.

4. Concluding: writing better futures

> If there were no escape, no excess or remainder … the universe would be without potential, pure entropy, death – Massumi, 2002

In this article we offer two readings of data. The two accounts conceptualise the body and its capacities in different ways, from its instrumentalisation under affective economies to its autonomy through co-constitutive emergence. In this way the article gets to the dual – and somewhat dissonant – imperative for research on embodied experience. As Ben Anderson explicates, we must seek an understanding of 'how affective capacities and relations are the 'object-target' of techniques of governance' while also remaining cognisant of 'how affective life may be an 'outside' that exceeds biopolitical mechanisms' (2012, p. 30). To this end, the interpretations offered here reside on either side of such an imperative and thus allow us to keep in balance both manipulation and escape, subordination and resistance. In this conclusion, however, we return to the performative ontologies that informed our readings to make a conceptual, ethical and epistemological case for presenting research that explores the affective life on an 'outside'. More clearly: we aim to recognise the importance of being critical of manipulations of affect while emphasising strongly the imperative to remain open to the possibilities that are evident in the second interpretation of data we offer here. We thus follow Anderson's agenda for research on affective experience but heed J.K. Gibson-Graham's intervention on performative ontologies.

In the effort to understand the ways that embodied experience is subject to expressions of power, there is important critical insight offered by the 'power-centric' reading we offer in section 3.1. As critical scholars we must acknowledge the ways that power relations and inequalities impact on the experience of international volunteering and how they can constrain, or even govern, the volunteer-host encounter. More broadly, the critical work of the first reading provides insight into 'how … collective injunctions to humility, compassion, tolerance, diversity' and so forth play out within the hierarchies of 'affective capitalism' (Vrasti, 2011, p. 2). Within these hierarchies, as we attempt to show in the anti-capitalocentric' reading in section 3.2, there are instances of more equitable relations. Excavating these instances offers a politically productive mode of research by emphasising the potential of relations (however faint) in formation outside hierarchical orderings of the world. This returns us to Gibson-Graham's 'post-

structural twist' where, as critics, we are implicated in an ontological project of 'creating or "performing" the worlds we inhabit', placing a 'new responsibility on the shoulders of scholars – to recognise their constitutive role in the worlds that exist, and their power to bring new worlds into being' (2008, p. 614). The emphasis on an anti-capitalocentric approach, then, is not borne of idealism but rather of an orientation to write into being something of the more equitable relations that are nascent in the data. To strengthen further our emphasis on this approach, we close with a brief explication of the conceptual, epistemological and ethical correctives towards interpreting data in the way we do in section 3.2.

Conceptually, when straight lines are drawn from power to body, there is only a weak notion of how power 'gets at' life. Affects and emotions can be understood as 'autonomous' capacities, making them unstable and contestable sites of control and manipulation (Anderson, 2007; Massumi, 1995). This gives cause to question instances where affective life is attributed to the affective expressions of neoliberal power. Epistemologically, where power is attuned to 'our affective capacities' such that life's 'order, intimacy, and autonomy' are instrumentalised 'without remainder' (Vrasti, 2011), power is imagined as both omnipresent and omnipotent; even, if it is possible, taking hold of autonomy. The subsequent production of knowledge, therefore, always already knows the world and its subjects as subordinate to, or emergent from, expressions of power. Ethically, reducing research participants' words and embodiments to analysis informed only by power and dominance strips them of agency and subjects them to another round of subject-making in the discourses of research; these are obvious ethical indiscretions (see Griffiths, 2014b).

These correctives add weight to an anti-capitalocentric research praxis. Gibson-Graham argue we should write 'difference not dominance', asking ourselves: 'how might we, as academic subjects, become open to possibility rather than limits on the possible?' and work towards the objective 'to understand the world in order to change it' with the post-structural twist: 'to change our understanding *is* to change the world in small and sometimes major ways' (2008, p. 615, original emphasis). Once accepting of this possibility and the small push our writing might provide in '*mak*[ing] realities', there comes a more politically urgent question noted by John Law and John Urry: 'which realities?' (2005, p. 404, original emphasis). This is a pivotal moment in the interpretation of data such as that we present here, we are forced to consider: 'which [realities] do we want to help to make more real, and which less real? How do we want to interfere (because interfere we will, one way or another)?' (Law & Urry 2005, p. 404). Taken as a

whole, therefore, the two readings we present require a moment of dissonance, that we conceptualise two and more interpretations of the data - the readings together present a parallax. If we are to engage as social scientists, the push cannot only be to know, but to interfere, *to change*. Setting limits on subjectivity, therefore, would seem antithetical to a project of, to borrow from Law and Urry, making more desirable realities real. Rather, returning to the three correctives: conceptually, we refuse cause-effect power-body relations; epistemologically, we are open to the body's capacities as autonomous; and ethically, we resist subordinating intimate expressions of experience to power-centric interpretative practices.

Accordingly, while the discussion as a whole represents a parallax, whose angles are recognised as somewhat arbitrarily chosen, the choice is made on sure political and ethical ground. And this is the methodological humility of a performative ontology explicated; research does not reflect a fixed world, it writes one, and writing is a practice of choices that we attempt to uncover here. In doing so we argue that we cannot order life solely within fields of power, the world is messier and potentially better and our work might reflect this. More specific to the case of volunteering, we argue for making research sensitive to the nascent potentials of the body's intersubjectivities across structural difference. The political stakes are high: in research on volunteering, the responsibilities of performative ontology opens writing to the possibilities of the rich potentials of solidaristic, 'enlivened' embodiments of volunteer-host relations (Griffiths, 2014a; 2015; Smith et al., 2010). We might also explore the ways that volunteering can itself be an 'outside' – or, after Gibson-Graham (2008), a 'diverse economy' – where social relations with hosts are not subject to the same market forces that shape more straightforwardly capitalist forms of tourism (Mosedale, 2012). In the broader field of development, attunement to an 'outside' enables examination of the diverse economies of knowledge and the possibilities for more equitable relations with, and agential roles for, host communities (McGregor, 2009; McKinnon, 2009). If, then, the political substance of South-North relations lies in imbalance (which is surely does), where a glimpse of more even ground appears, it merits exploration and – in the process of performative ontology – facilitation, reification.

We therefore argue for a conceptualisation and interpretation of embodied experience in volunteering as a site of potential transformation and transcendence of the inequalities that otherwise set the conditions of the volunteer-host encounter. In this way, we hope, research might contribute to the very process it seeks to explore: more even relations on an otherwise uneven planet.

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