



# Refusing Reform, Reworking Pity, or Reinforcing Privilege? The Multivalent Politics of Young People's Fun and Friendship within a Volunteering Encounter

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses initiatives which took British young people from ethnic minority and disenfranchised backgrounds to volunteer in sub-Saharan Africa. It asks whether decolonial possibilities can be seen in the politics of youthful fun and friendship amid a practice undeniably driven by interpenetrating neocolonial logics, where enrolment in helping “needy” others is seen as a means to “improve” working-class and racially marked youth. The paper argues that volunteers’ investments in leisure constituted a politics of refusal towards how they were acted upon as objects of concern. More ambivalently, playful, friendly interactions between British and African youth disrupted relations of charitable pity and signalled desires for solidarity and equality, but cannot be claimed as fully decolonial. At times, fun also re-entrenched neocolonial and other oppressive relations. Overall, the paper demonstrates that a close reading of the multivalent, affective politics of young people’s fun and friendship can reveal much about the reproduction or subversion of contemporary neocolonial logics that operate both within and beyond the borders of postcolonial Britain.

**Keywords:** youth, decolonisation, affect, fun and friendship, neocolonialism, volunteer-tourism

## Introduction

This paper analyses the politics of fun and friendship within initiatives which took British teenagers to volunteer in sub-Saharan Africa. The predominant academic analysis of such “North–South” volunteering encounters is one of deep criticism: that they essentialise Africa, sentimentalise suffering, depoliticise poverty and inequality, fix and consume “otherness”, attempt to redeem the Western self as “innocent”, individualise and privatise political action, and legitimise interventionism (Crossley 2012; Darnell 2011; Diprose 2012; Mathers 2011; Mostafanezhad 2013; Simpson 2004). In addition to these damning analyses, the volunteering initiatives explored in this particular research could be subject to a further layer of critique. They engaged young people from low-income areas in London considered “at risk” of behaviour understood as “deviant”, or underachievement; and volunteering was framed as a means to catalyse gratitude, responsibility and

motivation in participants. Thus, as interventions for the “improvement” of classed and racialised youth in the global North through setting them up to “help needy others” in the global South, the initiatives could be considered “doubly neocolonial”, and testify to the longstanding interpenetration of the “civilising” logics of imperialism and efforts to reform “the barbaric national child” (Gagen 2007; Stoler 2001).

However, in my research, volunteering initiatives were also textured by many moments which seemed to *exceed* such criticisms. There were exchanges of dance moves accompanied by hysterical belly-laughter which momentarily dissolved lines of difference. There were the worthy voluntary tasks abandoned for joyful, spontaneous games, punctuated by handshakes, high-fives, and hugs which opened space for conversation across “North–South” divides. There were cheeky jokes muttered under the breath which took the wind out of a serious talk by a youth worker about the expected “lessons” of volunteering. Through attending to such dynamics, this paper presents a counter to work that is wholly critical of international volunteering, without dismissing the insights of existing critique. It does so by drawing on work in feminist geopolitics, emotional geographies, and children’s geographies which sees young people’s humour, play, friendly relations, and the adoption or avoidance of particular subject positions, as under-acknowledged forms of politics (Fluri 2019; Kallio and Häkli 2013; Skelton 2013).

This paper asks if, when, and how young people’s affective, emotional and performative politics of fun and friendship may contain decolonial possibilities, through a close reading of fun and friendship within a practice that is undeniably driven by neocolonial logics. In doing so, it contributes to this special issue not with a view of young people’s explicit decolonial activism, but by speaking to two areas relevant to broader decolonial geographic scholarship. Firstly, the paper demonstrates that exploring the politics which place young, racially marked and working-class citizens in postcolonial Britain as ambivalently both “colonisers and colonised, privileged and restricted” (McClintock 1995:6) can help nuance and sharpen our insights into the contemporary dynamics of a “colonised and re-colonising postcolonial world” (Noxolo 2017). Secondly, through nuanced ethnographic readings of young people’s responses to this dual position, the paper speaks to the ongoing problematic of how to take embodied actions, emotions, and affective life seriously as a potential source of oppositional politics “without disregarding the materialities of contemporary and historical inequalities” (Griffiths 2018:121), an issue crucial for scholars seeking decolonial possibilities amid “everyday politics” (Wood 2016).

The rest of the paper is laid out as follows. It begins by introducing the research, then elaborating on the politics of the particular volunteering initiatives explored as “doubly neocolonial”. The paper then outlines theoretical approaches to reading young people’s fun and friendship as emotional and affective intensities that are both “mediated by histories and dynamic and emergent” (Askins 2009:10). Three empirical sections build on this to argue that young people’s investments in fun and friendship during volunteering trips had multivalent effects. The paper sees decolonial possibilities in the way the young volunteers refused how they themselves were labelled and acted upon as objects of concern

within postcolonial Britain. Friendly feelings between British and African youth signalled desires to relate across boundaries and expressions of respect and commonality, but these disruptions did not translate into fully decolonial politics. The paper also emphasises that fun and friendship also often re-inscribe hierarchies—especially neocolonial and gendered ones. Overall, the paper demonstrates that analysing the messy, ambivalent politics of young people's fun and friendship helps to make visible the continuities and disruptions of contemporary colonial logics that operate both within and beyond the nation.

## Research Context

This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted between 2012 and 2014 with youth groups based on London council estates (social housing areas), who engaged their participants—predominantly economically disenfranchised and many minority-ethnic young people—in short volunteering trips to sub-Saharan Africa. The research aimed to extend debates on international volunteering beyond totalising criticism of the way such mobilities reinforce privilege for an archetypal upper-middle-class, White subject, and to better understand the actually-occurring politics of how “popular humanitarian” (Mathers 2011; Mostafanezhad 2013) imaginaries and practices of “doing good” in the global South are being enlisted in shaping subjectivities within the global North (Baillie Smith 2013), including for non-elite, as well as privileged, subjects (Cheung Judge 2016, 2020).

The research engaged with two main case studies. The first was a youth charity, “Springboard”,<sup>1</sup> based on a south-west London council estate. I participated in their work as a weekly youthwork volunteer for over a year, accompanied a group on a ten-day trip to Nakuru, Kenya in February 2013, and participated in pre- and post-trip activities. The second was a youth group associated with a church on an east London estate, “Kingsfield”, with whom I went on a three-week trip to several areas in Zimbabwe in August 2013, and also participated in pre- and post-trip activities. The ethos and organisational histories of the two groups were quite different,<sup>2</sup> but both were well-regarded for their long-term, locally embedded community work. During their short trips to sub-Saharan Africa, both groups undertook voluntary tasks such as painting, construction, or participating in providing food or activities for children via local community organisations, and enjoyed leisure activities. As well as ethnography, I interviewed young participants both before and after the trips, and interviewed youth workers, funders, and young people who had gone on similar trips. In total, 36 young people and 24 key informants were interviewed. A notable gender imbalance of 27 young men and nine young women in the “youth sample” reflected a gender bias in trip participation, due to a strongly masculine subculture in Springboard and fewer female participants in both groups.<sup>3</sup> Although racialised categories often conceal as much as they illuminate, 11 of the young participants were “Black” (of varied African and Caribbean heritages), 12 were others racialised as “non-White” (of mixed parentage, south Asian, and Latin American heritage), and 13 were “White” (of varied class and regional heritages). Socio-economic backgrounds

were not uniform, but the majority of participants were from lower-income households and living in social housing.

An accurate description of my positionality would be a “White-privileged” (though of I am of mixed-race heritage, I am predominantly read as white), female scholar from the global North, with a middle-class habitus. Though “personalities”, performances, and intersubjective emotions as well as categories of social difference impacted the research in varied and dynamic ways (Bennett 2004), my positionality was broadly one of an “involved and familiar outsider” to the young people’s local communities (through voluntary youthwork during research aided by several years youthwork experience in similar settings) and an “outsider” to the places we visited in Kenya and Zimbabwe.

The salience of these details—aside from the convention of asserting research rigour—is to position this paper in relation to the special issue’s focus on decolonial politics. It is crucial to note that though the research interrogates how “popular humanitarian” practices are bound up with neocolonial global imaginaries and postcolonial national politics, it was not embarked upon as a piece of decolonial scholarship, centred and rethinking *from* the South (Radcliffe 2017). Given the critiques of “turning decolonialism into a metaphor” (Tuck and Yang 2012), whilst the structures of the discipline remain deeply complicit with neocoloniality and white privilege (Esson et al. 2017; Noxolo 2017), it is important to be clear about this. The silence in this research on the voices of the Kenyan and Zimbabwean communities in the encounters reflects the normalisation of research approaches which close down space for decolonial politics. I can only be “unsettled” by this retrospective reflection for my future work (Tuck and Yang 2012). The paper draws more from postcolonial scholarship which traces imperial legacies in the present, rather than making decolonial use of concepts and linguistic tools from the global South to dismantle dominant epistemologies (Radcliffe 2017). However, what the paper *does* take from decolonial scholarship is an aim to deepen our understanding of how imperial global geopolitics, racism and other forms of oppression are interlinked in the “colonial present”, and to direct attention to the political, as well as analytical, questions this raises (Radcliffe 2017; Tuck and Yang 2012).

## **Popular Humanitarianism, “Urban Youth”, and Colonial Logics Within and Beyond the Nation**

Following the challenge of postcolonial and decolonial scholars to think clearly about varied colonial encounters in their particularities, it is productive to examine the volunteering initiatives in this research as sites where multiple forms of colonial politics are present. Critiques of contemporary “North–South” volunteering mobilities point out that they echo their historical antecedents of colonialism, mission, and exploration in casting western individuals as agentive “global subjects”, doing a presumed interventionist “good” through action in/upon communities in the global South presumed lacking capacity or capability (Mathers 2011; Simpson 2004). Volunteering can be understood as neocolonial in the way it enacts: *differentiation* at the imaginative and embodied level between “self” and “other”;

*disremembering* of the histories of exploitation and mutual constitution between colonisers and colonised; *appropriation*, in terms of making others into that which can be used; and *erasure* and disrespect for lives and knowledges in the global South (Noxolo 2011). Furthermore, commentators highlight that a resurgent “popular humanitarianism” (Mathers 2011; Mostafanezhad 2013) exists beyond the state-led formal development sector, a fundamentally affective politics, in which sentimental visions of care, compassion, pity and altruism animate a “celebrity-charity-corporate complex” (Brockington 2014; Everingham and Motta 2020; Mostafanezhad 2013). The trips in this case were no exception, with discourses of visiting places of “pure poverty” to “have an impact” by “helping kids” who “have almost nothing” suffusing young people’s understandings of volunteering (Cheung Judge 2020).

At the same time, the young people participating in these trips could be positioned not only as “colonisers” but also as subjects of oppression. Tuck and Yang (2012:5) discuss the management of certain populations within imperial nations through “particularized modes of control—prisons, ghettos, minoritising, schooling, policing—to ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white elite” as “internal colonisation”. Most of the young participants in this study were subject to “moral panics” around the intersections of youth, crime, race and class, decontextualised from the fact they are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of austerity, disinvestment and over-policing (Hall et al. 1978). Participants growing up on council estates face stigmatising associations of danger, dysfunction and dependence (McKenzie 2013). However, striking racial disproportionality in “stop and search” and custodial sentencing, amplified and legitimised by racialised representations of “gang culture” (Elliott-Cooper et al. 2014) evidences the fact non-White young men are especially subject to being ontologised as criminal, a viscerally painful experience for both individual young men and their communities (Cahill et al. 2019).

Historical scholars underline that British imperialism was closely entangled with the reproduction of unequal, layered hierarchies of class within the nation (Canadine 2002). McClintock (1995) argues that boundary-policing around class, gender and race in the UK and its colonies were intimately linked. For instance, representations of the Irish as “Celtic Calibans”, or East London slums as realms of exotic savagery highlight an associational chain of anxieties that ran between the urban poor, children and the subjects of empire. Penal and pedagogic efforts targeting young, working-class and racialised citizens within imperial nations closely mirrored those in overseas imperial settlements, characterised by moralising missions of reform and “uplift”, categorisations of deserving and undeserving, and close attention to embodied, affective behaviours and gender (Gagen 2007; McClintock 1995; Stoler 2001). Such concerns are echoed in the present day, as young people in this research were framed by policy, schools, and to a certain extent youthwork spaces, as “at risk”. This label, common in youth policies since the late 1990s, often leads to slippage into young people being seen as “risky”, and justifying pre-emptive interventions concerned with “failure” or criminality (Turnbull and Spence 2011). Other terms loaded with racialised, classed and gendered codes, such as “urban youth”, are used in ways which subject young

people to scrutiny that they are not “aspirational” or “disciplined” enough (Brown 2013; Cheung Judge 2020; Kulz 2014).

Discourses of popular charity in the global South and concerns about “urban youth” in the UK not only echo one another, but are “interconnected through the power geometries of global colonial-modernity” (Radcliffe 2017:332). Elsewhere, I have laid out how the volunteering initiatives in this research were framed (by adults and young people) as catalysing the “transformation” of participants into more grateful, charitable, responsible, motivated and aspirational subjects, through “helping” needy others and working hard (Cheung Judge 2020). Thus, we can read North–South volunteering as a practice driven by the affective logics of “internal coloniality” around class and race *within* Britain as well as neo-colonial geopolitics. Indeed, popular humanitarian mobilities function here—as Stoler (2001:850) wrote about reform efforts in imperial centres—as “a sentimental education” that “did more than produce their overseas others ... [but] policed the cultural protocols and competencies that bounded their ‘interior frontiers’ ... to rescue young citizens and subjects in the making”. Though these initiatives are particular, they are typical of widespread contemporary currents. For example, Wilson (2019) explores popular representations of young British women’s engagements with their countries of heritage in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. She argues that discourses of development, particularly around assumed gendered oppression in the “non-West”, function to enrol racially-marked young women in neocolonial project of spreading “British values” abroad, whilst also reflecting the fact their Britishness requires “continual reaffirmation and proof, thus reinforcing racialised structures of citizenship” (Wilson 2019:1664; see also Back et al. 2012; Fortier 2008).

However, in tracing these overarching politics, we risk overdetermining colonial power. Overlooked histories of anti-colonial resistance to the British empire include campaigns in the metropole which at times drew connections of solidarity between the working classes, women, and the colonised (Gopal 2019). Furthermore, scholars who explore the policing of affective and intimate relations to imperial logics write that everyday intimacies were never fully “mastered”, and often where we can trace ambivalent oppositions (McClintock 1995; Stoler 2001). In contemporary work on global North–South encounters, the classed (Griffiths 2017) and racialised (Cheung Judge 2016) subject positions of those from the global North have been written about as complicating (though not overturning) neocolonial relations, for example through shared sensitivity to unfair histories, or alternative imaginaries of Africa and Blackness beyond the racialised hierarchies of charitable visions. Thus, it is not inevitable that young people accept the logics of transforming themselves through “hard work and helping”, or inevitably re-enact “colonial fantasies” in their encounters with Africa and those they meet. Vivid affective and embodied moments in volunteering often seem to disrupt the inequalities of the encounter (Griffiths 2018). How much can we claim for such moments? And do fun, friendship and leisure—standing in contrast to pity, care and anxiety that are central to colonial logics—contain decolonial possibilities in particular?

## Theorising Youthful Fun as an Ambivalent Feeling-Force

Asking about the decolonial possibilities of young people's "fun" requires theorising an approach to this question. "Fun" is a shorthand for a complex idea. Bayat's (2009:138) understanding of "fun" fits well with the way volunteering trips in this research were suffused with:

... ad hoc, non-routine, and joyful pursuits—ranging from playing games, joking, dancing ... to particular ways of speaking, laughing, appearing, or carrying oneself ... the expression of individuality, spontaneity and lightness, in which joy is the central element.

This description highlights the emotional, affective, embodied and performative dimensions of fun. I follow those who draw from theorisations of both affect and emotion to consider fun as a feeling (Hadfield-Hill and Horton 2014) and atmosphere (Anderson 2009), both a nameable emotional state experienced subjectively as within individual bodies *and* an affective state that is inspired relationally, socio-spatially contextual, and has a transpersonal, more-than-cognitive quality (Askins 2016; Bondi 2005). The politics of affect and emotion have been subject to debate around whether emphasising "emergence" underplays entrenched inequality, or whether re-codifying affect into representation reifies existing power structures (McCormack 2003).

This paper agrees that the pre-discursive corporeality of affects in volunteering encounters is a potential source of politics "insubordinate to—and therefore transcendent of—the subject positions delineated by the uneven flows of global power and privilege" (Griffiths 2018:115), but also that an emphasis on affect as always transcendent is reductive, and misses the ways circulations of intersubjective affect can reify as well as subvert uneven relations (Everingham and Motta 2020), and thus it is imperative to ask: what are feelings *doing* (Askins 2016)? Theorisations of feelings as both ever new and deeply shaped by past contacts are helpful. Sara Ahmed (2004) writes that emotional contacts "surface" (signal the boundary or edge) of collective bodies, giving constitutive shape to nations, subjects, and politics. Feelings always have the possibility to constitute politics anew, but repeated "loops" of feeling ossify cultural politics which fix some subjects in place whilst "moving" others (Ahmed 2004; Pedwell 2012). Following Ahmed, fun, as an emotional intensity no more "innocent" than "negative" feelings, works to align some "feeling bodies" with one another in ways that may either reproduce or disrupt existing boundaries and hierarchies.

Analysing fun as politics also draws from rich scholarship in children's geographies which "peel[ed] back the layers of largely adult-defined notions of 'action' to discover subversive and tactical, but frequently overlooked responses by children and young people" (Wood 2016:17), in which "received meanings and relations are refused or reworked" (Katz 2011:56). Drawing on feminist attention to overlooked spaces of social reproduction and change and de Certeau's (1984) concept of everyday spatial practices as "tactics of the weak", scholars of youthful politics assert young people's capacity and propensity to act in undetermined ways to articulate and enact (in varied registers) responses to issues in their

communities, schools, and households which shape their present and future worlds (Kallio and Häkli 2013; Skelton 2013; Wood 2016).

In particular, young people's emotions have been understood as a key means through which young people negotiate geopolitical discourses in ways embedded in the specificities of their everyday lives, intergenerational histories, and situated social positions (Pain et al. 2010). Relatedly, Häkli and Kallio (2018:65) propose that young people's performances of self, subject position, and intimate relationships are key manifestations of their political agency, "animated when ... [they] become attentive to social power relations embedded in particular subject positions that they end up accepting, averting, or transforming". Furthermore, given young people's bodies and relationships are often subject to anxious management as vectors of the future, their desires, intimacies and friendships become crucial sites of politics (Smith 2013), and "friendship tactics" (Wood 2012) and bodily contacts (Hayes-Conroy and Saenz Montoya 2017) often express young people's caring and connecting intentions which extend or subvert adult political frameworks.

Making visible young people's everyday acts of fun and friendship as "political" meshes well with decolonial scholars' emphasis on looking for new ways of knowing and making the world (Tuck and Yang 2012), though it does not mean fun is decolonial. Humour, playfulness and laughter have been analysed as forms of "counter-politics" that can discursively challenge authority, reveal the absurdity of power and taboos, provide release in difficult situations, and foster interaction across difference and solidarity (Fluri 2019; Ridanpää 2014; Routledge 2012). Bayat (2009) argues that the political power of young people's pursuit of pleasure in the Middle East lies in the way this disturbs the closure of capitalist, religious or nationalist ideological paradigms. However, humour is also often central to maintaining dominance through expressing superiority and disciplining boundaries (Ridanpää 2014). Similarly, friendship, as a chosen relationship brought into being by emotion, and shaped—but not limited by—categories of social difference, is central to both the reproduction and the reworking of the social order (Bunnell et al. 2012).

Not only are fun and friendship neither intrinsically progressive or conservative, but they also often have multivalent effects. For instance, humour creates spaces of "exclusive inclusivity" and draws boundaries in some directions even as they break them in others (Fluri 2019). For example, "lads' humour" can be seen as working-class resistance to middle-class educational norms (Willis 1977), but in doing so it may also constitute, organise and police hyper-heterosexualised masculinity (Kehily and Nayak 1997). Multivalence can also appear in more subtle ways, as Macpherson (2008) discusses in her analysis of visually-impaired people's humour, where the line between subversion and simply coping can be hard to identify. Indeed, fun and friendship had multivalent effects in this research, which the remainder of the paper turns to elaborate.

## **Multivalent Fun**

### ***Hard Work or a Holiday? Pursuing Leisure, Resisting Reform***

As outlined above, in this research volunteering was framed as an experience of "doing good" which had the power to "transform" volunteers into more grateful,

responsible and motivated subjects. Echoing imperial and reform rationalities that saw that “indolence and insolence had to be checked ... that a ‘desire to work’ was the ingredient lacking ... not opportunity that needed to be changed” (Stoler 2001:854), “hard work” was seen by the vast majority of adults, and many of the young participants, as central to the rationale for volunteering. “Hard work”—in pre-trip fundraising, embodied labour during trips, and dispositional performances afterwards—was seen as both a means and an outcome of the idealised, staged journey of witnessing poverty and responding by becoming a more grateful, motivated, responsible subject. This was most starkly expressed by some of Springboard’s wealthy business funders, whose support for the trips was motivated by anxious concerns about working-class and racialised young people as (potential) criminals:

From the outside it could be seen as a jolly ... “Oh these kids now, you know, he’s been dealing drugs and now they’ve put him on a plane and taken him to Africa.” ... So you’ve got to be careful people see it for what it is ... That they’re there to work. They’re there to rehabilitate. (Martin, Springboard funder)

However, in reality, “hard work” was not at the forefront of most young participants’ minds. Research diary entries capturing informal chat in youth groups are filled with young people’s excited anticipations and reminiscences about weather, food, accommodation, swimming pools, restaurant visits, adventures on safari, jokes and gossip. In post-trip interviews many emphasised “unforgettable”, “once in a lifetime” experiences of travel, leisure and adventure around declarations of “lessons learned”. Although research with privileged young people highlights similar findings (Sin 2009; Waters et al. 2011), young people’s desire for leisure and adventure over “doing good” takes on a different significance in the face of the reform pressures embedded in their lives, and the economic barriers to travel for non-elite young subjects. For example, in contrast to adult concerns that “it wasn’t just a free holiday ...” (Rashid, youth worker), Dylan discussed how his involvement in the youth group was, indeed, driven by the appeal of a “holiday”:

I dropped [my friend] at Springboard when he was leaving [on a volunteering trip last year]. And it seemed good. Like he was going to Kenya, he was going on holiday—for that price, as well! ... So it made me think, “Oh, I might have to go next year.” ... So, been coming to the meetings, been doing what I can to come. (Dylan, Roehampton)

Such understandings—whether explicit or implicit—of the trips as “holidays” stood in contrast to visions of voluntary “hard work” as a route to “conditional citizenship” (Fyfe and Milligan 2003) and as such were a refusal of moralised framings, such as those of Martin the funder (above), which cast participants as deviant or apathetic.

Ethnography also bears witness to refusals in the way young people’s investments in “having a laugh” affirmed their existing ways of being as legitimate, and prioritised intimacy between peers above volunteering as a route to individual reform. A vignette<sup>4</sup> from the Kingsfield trip to Zimbabwe illustrates this:

*We sit around a blazing campfire in the evening. Marley says, with a raised eyebrow and a cheeky smile, "Who's going to tuck me in?" Peter is batting away insects whilst screaming, "Get away! Evil ting! Dat is not my portion!", parodying a Pentecostal preacher. Others are teasing Nathaniel about when everyone accidentally saw his bare bum. A group is enthusing about music, shouting suggestions, and three lads jump onto a bench and belt out a song, hamming it up with their hands on their chests and their eyes closed: "... Baby ... you should let me LOVE YOU ...!" Everyone erupts into screeching, hysterical laughter.*

*We get asked by another group to be quiet, and with some grumbles it winds down. They sing a ballad, people lean against each other, shoulder rubs are exchanged. There is chat about who has been drunk before, whispers about someone being high once in church. Some of them are singing Meek Mill's "Amen" with its sexually explicit lyrics fused with religious language.<sup>5</sup> Some have pushed two benches together to make a sort of bed, from which exclamations come: "Who's touching me?!"—"Paedo!"—"Three way!"—"Ooh, look at the moon, it's like Twilight!" I clock some snuck-along cigarettes being offered.*

*In the chilly morning air the next day the embers of the fire are still smouldering. A few of them slept outside on the bench-bed, and are squished up together in their sleeping bags, their faces lit up with excitement and joy.*

On the one hand, the joking, flirtation, celebrations of popular culture, embodied contacts, and mild rebellions recounted above seem only banalities that accompany many adolescent gatherings. However, the intense investments young people constantly made in such "teenage kicks" during trips bears consideration. Performances of "youthfulness" around shared symbols, dispositions, and ways of feeling enact a "politics of presence" (Bayat 2009). Here, "youthful messing about" was a transpersonal affective force creating an "exclusive inclusivity" (Fluri 2019), more specifically, an age-specific space away from the pressures on young people to transform into the "right type" of subjects. For instance, light-hearted play around risk and experimentation, subverting the sacred, or sexuality existed in friction with serious adult visions of virtue, which in this youth group (linked to a church), included Christian morality as well as the emphasis on being charitable contained in popular humanitarianism. Thus, "the joys of immediate and instant pleasures rather than on those of distant and abstract referents" (Bayat 2009:156) disrupted hegemonic discourses of neocolonial charity, religion, and hard work. Political agency is visible in young people's assertion and celebration of their existing (rather than future, "better") subjectivities (Häkli and Kallio 2018).

And what are the politics *within* this youth-space claimed through fun? As highlighted by the lyrics of "Amen", affective politics that may be liberatory in one dimension can uphold oppressions here, gendered in others, an issue explored further below. However, age-specific spaces often generated connections across difference. For instance, the Hackney-Zimbabwe group were a "super-diverse" collection of young people, and in London friendships within the group predominantly fell along lines of "difference" around intersections of class and race. However, during the trip young people initiated constant playful contact across the lines of existing friendships via jokes, pranks, games, and singalongs. For instance, one evening, a game of impressions led a young Black woman to joke about

“White people accents”, opening up a long, giggle-filled evening of play with accents, and accompanying discussions of class and race in the local area. Humour performed an equalising disruption of hierarchies, allowing the normalised hegemony of Whiteness to be scrutinised, and interracial friendships to be strengthened, all whilst preserving good feeling (Rindanpää 2014).

Finally, fun not only claimed space away from adult-led lessons and indicated desires to connect across difference, but also played a part in young people making claims directed towards recognition and respect amid the classed, racialised hierarchies of wider adult society. This is illustrated by an account of some of my interactions with one young man:

*On the bus to the children’s home one day I sit next to Henry. We get chatting about Hackney, where we both live. Henry says he dislikes “how people are in Hackney”, complaining, pointedly, “some people wouldn’t talk to you because they thought you were too different”. He is curious about whether I find Hackney “bad”—I say no, and talk about having a close-knit local community. Henry said, “See, if we do that they call it a gang!”*

*The talk turns back to the Kenyan children’s home. Henry says, “... I’m not saying they have it easy, but Hackney is hard, man—I’m not saying harder but ... at least as hard.”*

*During the week Henry is unapologetic about being more interested in chatting to (and chatting up) two young women who work at the children’s home than doing the voluntary painting job, and complains that he should be paid to paint.*

*One evening we stay at the children’s home to eat dinner. Henry moans that he wants to go back to our accommodation and chill. I comment that it’s good to get to know our hosts a bit better. He replies, nodding his head in the direction of myself and other leaders, “I want to get to know people who would pass you on the street in London”.*

Henry’s consistent petitions for leisurely time-spaces during the trip speak of a desire to transcend his position not by engaging in reform or charity but rather by simply enjoying a temporary suspension of the classed and racialised boundaries that mark his marginalisation in Britain. His comparison of our different experiences of Hackney explicitly called out how young Black men are subject to “crisis” representations of gang culture and the lack of conviviality and respect he experiences from middle-class residents of gentrifying Hackney. His resistance to volunteering as unpaid labour, and comments that “Hackney is at least as hard” as the street children’s lives, resists “becoming grateful” for relative privilege, and assert the hardships of life in low-income Britain which are sidestepped or delegitimised in the trips. This testifies again to young people’s feelings about and negotiations of their subject positions as a central means through which they enact political responses (Häkli and Kallio 2018; Pain et al. 2010). Young people’s celebratory investments in leisure worked to resist, refuse, and create spaces apart from the politics of “internal coloniality” which ask young racialised and classed people to “improve” through the “hard work” and “helping” of volunteering in order to gain full acceptance in post-colonial Britain.

## ***“New Mates”—Youthful Friendly Bonds and Reimagined Global Geographies***

Can fun and friendship enable alternative politics to those of charitable pity and paternalistic “help” which cast sub-Saharan Africa as a “backdrop” to young British people’s transformations? As discussed earlier, this paper cannot answer this question from a truly decolonial perspective centred on views from the global South. However, ethnography recorded a plethora of interactions which cut against the grain of neocolonial charity. Not all of them revolved around friendship and fun, but youthful pleasures opened up space for friendly interactions which exceeded charitable relations. For instance, young people engaged in bodily and affective exchanges based on affinities of age, gender, personality and mutual enjoyment of globalised “urban youth culture” and style. This disrupted not only a “helping” hierarchy, but broader deficit representations of Africa and Blackness that volunteering frameworks reinforce. Elsewhere I have written about the visceral, pleasurable affects of globalised popular music, rhythm and dance as “resonances” which drew British and African bodies together and inscribed Africa as a locus of diasporic black cool rather than of poverty, pity or primordialism (Cheung Judge 2016).

Young people emphasised humour as a conduit for connection. Their mentions of their African-peer “rivals” in games they played, or “banter” with those they met, evoked an everyday sense of connection. Below, Didi recounts how “joking” undermined her view of homeless Zimbabwean youth through ideas of abjection and difference, highlighting decolonial possibilities in moments of “unlearning” (Everingham and Motta 2020). Marley’s laughter-filled memory of a young Zimbabwean called Johnson recounts how an intersubjective exchange of cheeky, masculine teasing led to a sense of “bonding”:

They were joking amongst themselves ... they all broke out in song ... It was like —“*Oh my gosh, they’re just like the boys!*” ... they’re just like us, homeless or with homes. Zimbabwean or English. (Didi, Hackney)

Johnson, I saw him as ... just like myself! ... Yeah, he was a cool boy, he was funny! ... He was calling my name! And I was pretending to ignore him! And then like, he picked up a stone, he was gonna dash it at me! ... I really bonded with him ‘cos ... that’s something that I would do [chuckling]. (Marley, Hackney)

Decolonial and other critical scholarship cautions us to take “just like us” claims with caution. Warm, convivial and friendly moments are not necessarily “meaningful contacts” which overturn accrued histories of difference and inequality (Valentine 2008). Furthermore, “fantasies of mutuality” and “narratives of anti-conquest” (Pratt 1992) can be a mode by which colonisers are edified through contact with an “other” who is fixed in place (Ahmed 2004; Tuck and Yang 2012). Thus—particularly without a view from the “other side”—such feelings of mutuality cannot be claimed as “decolonial”. Yet this does not mean friendly connections are meaningless. Several young people narrated the bonds they built with age peers as *the key highlights* of their entire trips. For instance, Nathaniel (Hackney) cited learning new handshakes and exchanging a baseball cap with a young man he met in Zimbabwe as his “best experience”, and Dave

(Roehampton), reminisced repeatedly about “a bike ride with the lads” in Kenya, and being laughed at by them when he admitted defeat on a hill. Given the brevity of relationships, “friendship” needs inverted commas, but young people’s “friendship politics” did highlight intentions to connect across difference (Bunnell et al. 2012; Wood 2012) as fellow young people interested in getting to know each other and “having a laugh” rather than relating as “helpers” and “helped”.

A glimpse of the political potential of friendly feelings was evident in young people inviting their new “mates” to visit the UK. In Kenya, one young man from London said to a Kenyan peer that if he came to visit, “the ghetto is the most welcoming place” and “my house isn’t big but you could always stay”, and another declare to some of the young people we’d met: “Come visit! And you can play Call of Duty [video game] with us all night!” Two young men enthusiastically announced that back in the UK they wanted to do a sponsored cycle ride to pay to “bring Simon over” (a young Kenyan they befriended): a reworking of what “charitable” action looks like and a critique of the lack of genuine exchange and mobility freedom underpinning “North–South” relations. There is a poignancy to these invitations, which contain earnest welcome and expression of resistant solidarity between places considered poor and dangerous, but also a low awareness of the non-universality of life-worlds and the inequity of global mobility. This highlights that affective encounters may have potential which is nonetheless limited without critical pedagogy.

Similarly, the question of the after-effects and “stickiness” of momentary suspensions of uneven power relations is also crucial to the issue of whether the affects of fun may lead to decolonial politics (Fluri 2019; Griffiths 2018). In the research, post-trip interviews captured a predominant incorporation of affective encounters with Kenyan and Zimbabwean people into narratives of sentimental care for infantilised others (phrases such as “helping kids”, “teaching kids”, “falling in love with kids” saturated interviews), but there were feelings that remained sufficiently apart from these narratives to challenge them. In particular, affective experiences which led to feelings of commonality and recognition had the potential to destabilise the place-myths of neocolonial geographies. Marvin likened the Zimbabwean informal settlement (often labelled “slum”) we volunteered in to his home, the Kingsfield estate, on the basis of an affective atmosphere of “community” which he perceives via children’s informal, leisurely use of public space, and a sense of convivial welcome. Youthful leisure as a point of mutual recognition becomes an opening to subvert the representations which frame the trips, both of Africa as utterly different, and of low-income spaces in the UK as alienating and dangerous.

Hatcliffe [Zimbabwean informal settlement] ... reminds me of Kingsfield [council estate] a bit ... there’s so much little kids there. They are always running around, and they’re always playing football ... anywhere there’s space ... in the park, or on the road ... Just the, like, hospitality of everyone, ‘cos ... most people in Kingsfield—they are like, very welcoming, and humble, and like, happy, in general. And that’s how they kind of were in Zimbabwe. (Marvin, Hackney)

Marvin’s emphasis on the vitality and positivity of youthful and collective life in the spaces of the UK council estate and the African informal settlement, more

often seen through lenses of danger, dysfunction and abjection, is a quietly radical move. It implicitly challenges the logic of “internal colonialism” in the UK which anxiously subjects young working-class and racialised bodies in public space to monitoring and over-policing. It also sidesteps viewing a materially poor place in Zimbabwe primarily through the lens of abject need, which is foundational to the logic that “doing something is better than doing nothing, and therefore, that doing anything is reasonable” (Simpson 2004:685) in neocolonial popular “North–South” volunteering initiatives. The seeds of solidarity are contained in the linkages he draws between the two places as defined by hospitality and fun, similar to the celebration of transnational Black life found in Cheung Judge (2016).

Furthermore, the laughter Marley (earlier in this section) let out at his memories of Johnson speak of how affective connections between young people can leave an intense trace in the body long after volunteers return home (Griffiths 2015). Young people mused repeatedly on the “the good vibe” and the “energy” they felt in “bonding” with Kenyans and Zimbabweans through smiles, laughter, dance and food. When these feelings were experienced in relation to young children, they often became narrated through ideas of sentimental care, but an “excess” remained, evident in the limits of narration, in declarations such as “the smiles ... the laughter ... I dunno, it was something *different*, you know” (Richie, Hackney). If a crucial provocation of decolonial scholarship is to recognise incommensurability, one quietly striking moment was when Nathaniel described the relationship he formed with Charles, a Zimbabwean teenager, in a way that kept respectful distance from the label of “friendship”, a lack of knowledge, or a right to claim intimacy:

We spoke and—just got on. He was a nice kinda guy, the kinda guy who you feel like ... ah, he doesn't deserve that ... I just got on with him ... I couldn't call him my friend, because I didn't know him ... it wouldn't be right to call him my friend. But yeah. If he was anything he would've been a friend. (Nathaniel, Hackney)

Here, an ineffable affective connection—“just getting on”—played into to a humanising politics which drive home the injustice of global inequality, and preserved a respectful space in which *not* to assimilate the lives of others into something knowable, or a project of achievement through “helping”. Friendly, humorous and playful bonds, particularly between adolescent age-peers *fractured* and *disrupted* the neocolonial politics of pity that frame volunteering, and speak of “the confusions and richness of travel encounters no matter how brief” (Mathers 2011:71). However, the predominant failure of such moments to translate into decolonial articulations, and their frequent “capture” by narratives of sentimental care, also raises the need for greater attention to how affective potential relates to discursive politics and structurally unequal exchanges (Everingham and Motta 2020).

### ***Problematic Pleasures and Progressive Pain: On Not Romanticising Fun***

This paper would be incomplete without a clear-eyed view of the way young people's fun at times played into actively strengthening neocolonial and other

oppressive politics. The youthful fun explored above as a refusal of moralised reform pressures often simultaneously cast Africa as an “anything goes” backdrop for volunteers, as illustrated in this vignette:

*In Kenya, I'm on the painting team. We find out we have the wrong type of paint and we don't have enough rollers. While we wait for the right supplies, a female youth worker and I try to get the young men to help with some other tasks, such as washing clothes, but they complain, one declaring, "Ugh, I don't want to touch someone's underwear!" They wander off to explore instead.*

*The next day, when we start painting, it's slow. They get distracted by a big insect, exclaiming "Bruv! That ting had muscles!!" They play up the instability of the wobbly ladder. They start chasing the goats and chickens, pretending the animals are a gang from a neighbouring South London estate. Someone shouts, "Empty the whole clip [of bullets] on them!" and they chase the animals and throw water at them, causing chaos. In the afternoon the leaders submit to the waning focus on painting and suggest the lads play football with the kids, which is greeted with enthusiasm. We leave the Kenyan workers clearing up.*

*At the weekend, we go on a day safari. We start early, bleary-eyed but excited. The lads beg to abandon the bus and go "lion trekking". We joke about them being eaten. We spot a giraffe, moving with magnificent grace. Someone says with awe, "Wow—its neck is really long!" and they get roundly laughed at. We see a group of impala, and the guide tells us that multiple females follow "the dominant male", eliciting chortles—"That's the life!" The guide points to a rocky outcrop and says, "Do you know what that is? Lion cliff, which ... " He gets cut off as someone shouts, "Lionel Richie and Cliff Richard!", and then conversation diverts to the Lion King.*

Here, we see that young people's embrace of leisure as resistance to reform is hard to disentangle from western entitlement to leisure. When embodied sensation—the heat, the ache of muscles—prompted feelings of tiredness or boredom, volunteers fell back on the global privilege. Feelings of fun and adventure were animated by “place myths” of Africa as an exotic, risky, playground (Mathers 2011) in ways that silence Kenyan voice (the guide whose insights were steam-rolled by relentless “banter”). On the one hand, irresponsible pleasure resists the call to become responsible young British subjects. However, irresponsible pleasure was also part of a Janus-faced colonial logic in which “Africa was a setting where British boys could become men but also where British men could behave like boys with impunity ... a great testing—or teething—ground for moral growth and moral regression” (Brantlinger 1985, quoted in Hubbard and Mathers 2004:450).

Furthermore, leisure, laughter and humour also worked to construct and celebrate hegemonic masculinities alongside western privilege. Gendered and classed “banter” amped up and projected toughness, risk and violence into voluntary work, denigrated feminised arenas, or the expression of earnest, child-like amazement (at the giraffe) (Kehily and Nayak 1997; Ridanpää 2014). In the Kenya trip, where the group was predominantly young men, and the wider culture of the youth organisation was celebratory of working-class masculinity, “banter” worked as an emotional-affective intensity creating spaces of “exclusive inclusivity” (Fluri 2019). For instance, Simon, a Kenyan who worked at the voluntary project,

enjoyed interactions with some of the male UK volunteers as they complimented him and joked about how if he came to the UK “you’ll pull!”, and drew him into jokes objectifying women. Such jokes silenced young women in the group and naturalised heteronormative misogyny, even as gendered affective vocabularies also worked to create friendly bonds which subverted a neocolonial relation. The salient point here is not only that fun should not be considered *de facto* progressive, but that it may have multivalent effects in varied directions.

As a corollary, many of the affects which fractured problematic politics of volunteering were not pleasant, but painful or awkward. For instance, in the Zimbabwe trip, the shared “contact zone” of Christianity (despite and because of its colonial history) meant volunteers were blessed, taught, admonished, corrected and preached at by Zimbabweans, sometimes creating discomforting moments of “critical intimacy” (Everingham and Motta 2020). On the Kenya trip, young people from the UK expressed sadness, frustration and recognition when they heard about former Kenyan street children’s experiences of police aggression, illegal ways of making a living, and being stigmatised as “bad kids”. Such connections were complex, containing solidarity but also sometimes also straying into voyeurism and claims to “sameness” on the part of the UK volunteers. Yet such moments of “affective resonance” (Cheung Judge 2016) around painful prejudice in young lives also suggest *potential* alternatives. In post trip interviews, young people expressed anger, guilt and confusion at inequality and the ethically-ambiguous acts of charity. Such affects may be as good places to start as “fun” when looking for decolonial politics (Henderson 2008) which trace lines between struggles that are locally distinct but linked through the global flows of colonial-capitalism (Katz 2011).

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the politics of young people’s fun and friendship in a specific “doubly neocolonial” site, where enrolment in neocolonial practices of “helping” Africa hopes to catalyse the “improvement” of working-class and racialised youth within the postcolonial nation. The paper asked what fun and friendship were doing on volunteering trips, and whether decolonial politics are visible in them. The analysis underscored that affective encounters and particular emotions are not *a priori* political in particular ways. At times, young people’s investments in leisure—encompassing humour, flirtation, relaxation, and “youthfulness”—spoke of a politics of refusal towards adjusting themselves into becoming the “right types” of subjects. At other times, friendly feelings between volunteers and their African peers—coalescing around playful age-based and “personality” affinities—disrupted the relations and representations of charitable pity and spoke of desires for solidarity, equality, and commonality. However, the paper also argued that it is crucial not to romanticise young people’s pleasures as progressive. At many times fun worked to re-entrench neocolonial expressions of charity and gendered oppression, or contradictorily expressed conformity and subversion in different dimensions simultaneously.

In making this analysis, the paper contributes to several broad areas of debate. Firstly, it nuances theorisation of young people's politics and the politics of affect and emotion in ways useful for those seeking decolonial possibilities in these forums. In children's geographies, the "mantra" of highlighting children's agency too rarely questions assumptions of a bounded individual subject (Holloway et al. 2019), and claiming young people's progressive "resistance" can be overstated (Jeffrey 2012). In this light, the paper demonstrates the richness in reading young people's affective expressions as containing political agency that is embodied, emergent and intersubjective, and spatially, socially and materially situated (Holloway et al. 2019), as a means to analyse politics involving young people that are as "heterogeneous, complex and unpredictable" as any (Kallio and Häkli 2013:2). Furthermore, amid a continued bifurcation between analyses of emotions as determined by power, or emphasis on the excessive potentials of affect which can understate the actuality of entrenched inequities, the paper has reasserted the value of non-binary views of "feeling". Felt encounters "surface" geographies, subjectivities and politics in ways that are never pre-determined and full of possibility, but are also often subject to closure or reincorporation into existing relations (Ahmed 2004; Everingham and Motta 2020).

The second contribution of this paper has been to engage with questions about the presence of neocolonial logics both within and beyond national borders. This paper highlights that arguments about the interpenetration of the imaginaries and practices through which imperial powers approached both their colonies and their classed, racialised and gendered citizens remain relevant in analysing contemporary postcolonial Britain. Young people in this research were in ambiguous positions as both subject to the anxious management of "internal colonial" drives (Tuck and Yang 2012)—and also as called to take part in "external" neocolonial politics of objectifying the global South through modalities of sentimental care which obscure the colonial histories and neoliberal exploitations that underpin global inequality (Mostafanezhad 2013). This is relevant to decolonial scholarship in that it underlines that while colonial logics are alive and well, drawing binaries of oppressed-oppressor between global North and South is not "adequate to the task of accounting for, let alone strategically opposing, the tenacious legacies of imperialism", and that it may be "at the crossroads of contradictions", rather than via overdetermined analyses of power that decolonial possibilities might be found (McClintock 1995:15).

In terms of future lines of enquiry, the paper speaks of more scope for more conversations between scholarship on the "conditional incorporation" and anxious management of working-class and racially-marked youth in postcolonial nations and the spaces of international development and other global geographical imaginaries (cf. Wilson 2019). Tracing these underexplored linkages reveals not only the mutual articulations of the boundaries of "otherness" at seemingly disparate sites, but also that the way subjects are set in different positions—through class, race and gender—in relation to neocolonial encounters can be part of the fracturing and disrupting of colonial logics. Finally, the paper demonstrates that engaging with the multivalent politics of young people's emotional and affective expressions has much to contribute in making visible the decolonial

in grounded, specific ways and thus is a critical tool in undoing the politics of colonial modernity (Esson et al. 2017; Noxolo 2017; Radcliffe 2017; Tuck and Yang 2012).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All organisational and individual names in this paper are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Springboard's ethos is informal and adventurous. Established by a charismatic and dedicated local couple in 2000, it has grown to provide a large range of weekly activities as well as enterprise and mentoring programmes, and is notably successful in reaching "high-risk" young men. A strong network of funders with ties to the corporate sector supported regular trips abroad. Kingsfield Church has been physically and socially embedded in a surrounding estate since it was built in the 1950s, running activities such as play groups, debt advice, and community meals. Youth activities span a continuum from leisurely to explicitly faith-based and include many participants who do not attend the church. The trip was a one-off initiative financed through small grants and community fundraising.

<sup>3</sup> I interpret this as emerging from a combination of gendered caring responsibilities, youth workers' focus on engaging "at risk" young men, and a lack of explicit focus on redressing gendered imbalances in both groups.

<sup>4</sup> The vignettes serve to convey situated, embodied and complex ethnographic data. They are elaborated and edited from research diary notes. Though of course not entirely free from interpretative elements, they are closely based on original notes at the time, and quotation marks indicate verbatim speech. The most significant alteration is the representation of time. This first vignette includes incidents from two consecutive nights in the same location.

<sup>5</sup> "Amen", Meek Mill feat. Drake: "I just wanna thank God / For all the pretty women he let into my life ... Now it's a lot of bad bitches in the building (Ooh, Amen) ... We make it light up like a church (Preach) / She wanna fuck and I say church (Preach) ..."

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