"I Feel Your Pain": Service-Learning Programs And The Liberal Narrative Of Empathy

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“I Feel Your Pain”: Service-Learning Programs and the Liberal Narrative of Empathy

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Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William & Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, service-learning programs have proliferated at colleges and universities, gaining broad support for their incorporation of critical reflection, academic learning, and volunteer work. The stated objective of these programs is transformation, both for students personally and for the communities with which they engage in terms of resources and justice. Through a case study of Fordham University’s Global Outreach program, though, I demonstrate that, by positing the emotion empathy as the most productive mechanism through which to radically transform oneself and set off a ripple of social change, university administrators and educators avoid actual structural transformation and instead obscure how service-learning often reaffirms hierarchical and postcolonial relations. I argue that by historicizing the concept of empathy—by identifying similar rhetorical devices deployed within service-learning programs in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, colonial legacies of Christian missionary work across time, and the nineteenth-century movement for the abolition of slavery—we can better understand the rise of service-learning programs, especially within Jesuit universities, and their promotion of direct encounters with racialized others as the premier mode of gathering authentic and real ‘knowledge that can lead to change. The focus on affective relations between individuals within service learning, I argue, carries forward dynamics that obscure rather than elucidate and attempt to change relations of power that depend on the continuation of systemic, racialized inequities.
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Finally, I am privileged to have a family that never ceases to offer their support, encouragement, and enthusiasm—none of this would be possible without them.
“We can see that the impossibility of inhabiting the other’s body creates a desire to know ‘what it feels like.’ To turn this around, it is because no one can know what it feels like to have my pain that I want loved others to acknowledge how I feel. The solitariness of pain is intimately tied up with its implication in relationship to others.”

-- Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*

During my senior year at Fordham University, I completed my last service-learning project through Fordham’s Global Outreach, a cultural immersion and service program that sends undergraduate students on week-long trips to areas in the United States and abroad. After applying to a handful of projects that would take place over spring break, I was accepted onto a team that travelled to Ecuador in partnership with the Catholic organization, Rostro De Cristo (“Face of Christ”). The project focused on learning the history and culture of Arbolito, one of many “invasion communities” established by groups of migrants on large areas of government or privately-owned land. Operating primarily as a cultural immersion experience, the trip emphasized community engagement over direct service through interactions with community members in their homes, at health centers, and during after-school programs.

As I neared the end of my undergraduate study, I had become deeply uncomfortable with the nature of service-learning programs. But the trip to

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Ecuador felt like the most progressive and least harmful method of orchestrating largely privileged white college students’ interactions with local, almost always disadvantaged, communities. Instead of going into a community blind to its circumstances and building houses, volunteering in an orphanage, or working on a sustainable farm, we were going to “live the Ecuadorian life” and listen to the stories of Arbolito residents. In fact, though, this trip too proved problematic. “Living the Ecuadorian life” as an American student meant traveling in a large group to ensure safety, living in a gated compound with a security guard, requiring a translator because no one spoke Spanish fluently, and touring around in a passenger van while almost no one local to the area owned a car. Our privilege shaped the entire experience.

When I first became involved with service-learning, I believed such programs had considerable merit, though I was at times critical of how they were run and operated. But by the time I had returned from my last trip, I was questioning whether they should exist at all. At the same time, I found it difficult to reconcile my emerging critique of the power relations necessarily involved in the structure of service-learning with the personal growth that I perceived as an outcome of these experiences. Despite the myriad issues concerning “voluntourism,” these were the only spaces I found in which I encountered relatively like-minded (white) individuals willing to have conversations about whiteness, interlocking systems of oppression, histories of state-mandated
violence and, ironically, the power inequalities inherent within service programs. It was within these spaces and through the conversations they occasioned, in conjunction with my coursework, that I began to develop a critique of the kinds of projects in which I was participating. I started to wonder why these programs appeared to position the oppressed as grounds for white edification, rehabilitation, and redemption. Had it been necessary for my own coming-to-consciousness that I witness the pain and suffering of others? Were these experiences responsible for expanding my critical lens, or could that be attributed to something else? Did it even matter when there were at times real, material consequences for communities as a result of this pedagogical practice? Were service-learning programs assuming that these interpersonal interactions would foster the development of a politics that would then seek the alleviation of such suffering? Was the service-learning approach the most productive, truthful, and authentic way for white American students to think through their power and privilege?

These questions have lingered beyond my departure from Fordham and they form the basis of this current project. As an undergraduate student, I had a number of experiences that could be characterized as “service-learning.” In addition to my trip to Ecuador described above, these included volunteering for

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various organizations within New York City; participating in a project that worked with teens experiencing homelessness in San Diego; traveling to Cape Town, South Africa to live, learn and serve for a semester; and enrolling in courses with service requirements. I list these experiences for three reasons: to explain my personal investment and interest in this subject matter, to suggest the current prevalence of service-learning initiatives in undergraduate institutions, and to illustrate what I believe is a general pressure on students in university environments to engage with their surroundings in ways represented as a “significant,” “profound,” and “transformative.” This pressure has only grown in recent decades, exemplified by the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act signed by former president Barack Obama in 2009, which expanded national service programs administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service.3

In this thesis, I aim to explore the affective discourse that permeates service-learning environments, literature, and promotional materials. Regardless of any individual program’s acknowledged objectives and goals, the justification for their existence and the explanation of their purpose almost always rely upon the assumption that human beings need empathy in order to engage with others and erase inequalities. Through my experiences and research, I became aware of how these programs were deploying empathy as an idealized mechanism through which to radically transform oneself, initiate a desire for social change,

and work towards the abolition of injustice and oppression. Although empathy is often understood as a powerful means of recognizing the humanity in all individuals, this assumption is challenged by scholars from various disciplines who have examined how empathy has functioned historically, structurally, and affectively in ways that reinforce inequality and reinscribe difference. I seek to put these two perspectives on empathy into conversation.

I began my introduction with a quotation from Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* in order to introduce the limitations of empathy that I aim to address in this paper. Ahmed discusses how the “solitariness” of pain compels us to disclose our suffering to others for the sake of acknowledgement and recognition, arguing that pain is never truly a private experience. In unraveling the public nature of emotions, I similarly question how emotions are expressed and performed, how they are socially constructed, how they circulate and operate as a form of capital, how they work to mediate the individual and society, and how they foster societal narratives of charity and service predicated on sentimentality. Ahmed’s discussion of pain’s perceived loneliness is also tied up with notions of liberal individualism that I hope to address. Ahmed remains at the atomistic level of interaction in her description of an individual who wants to share themselves with another but is thwarted by the “impossibility of inhabiting the other’s body.” In response, I am examining why these emotions are socially constructed as solitary, what that means for their public expression, and how this

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construction fosters a liberal narrative of sentimentality in which one’s entry into societal belonging occurs through the compassionate recognition of another’s pain and suffering.

Both my experiences and research involving service-learning programs make evident that these initiatives rest on a series of unquestioned assumptions: that emotions are deeply personal; that they are experienced only on an individual level; and, that they are unable to be properly understood by others. As I will discuss in the following section, the educational scholarship on service-learning either explicitly references the development of empathy as a measurable outcome or implicitly associates emotional expression as corresponding authentically to an individual’s interior self—if we believe that such an essential self even exists in the first place. If such programs claim to bring about an emotional self-transformation—a transformation that will subsequently instigate a desire to take social action—then these programs have to promote an understanding of emotion as tied to the intrinsic self to remain necessary. If these programs fundamentally are founded upon a belief that people only work towards justice if they have an emotional connection to those affected by injustice, then such programs would be threatening their own existence by encouraging analyses of how such emotions might be performed as a form of capital in a world that rewards the expression of some emotions by certain people (e.g. empathy from white people) and denigrates other emotions expressed by different people as undesirable (e.g. bitterness or rage from those “being served”).
In their study of the politics of global citizenship within study abroad programming, Waddell and Laliberte argue, “The realization that expressions of emotions are tied to economic, political, and social constraints and expectations begets an analysis that takes seriously how emotions are used to both ‘sell’ the program, as well as the emotional negotiations of students in shaping what they took away from the experience.” My aim with this paper—with the understanding that emotions are tied to our economic, political, and social world—is to offer a discursive analysis of how one service-learning program constructs a specific image of its identity, learning objectives, and environment through its particular deployment of empathy. With this goal in mind, I provide below first a brief history of service-learning, and then an analysis of Fordham University’s primary service-learning initiative through a close reading of its participant handbook. Following this, I present a review of empathy scholarship within the fields of philosophy, literary studies, and critical theory.

Within scholarship in the field of education, “empathy” is most often explored as part of our supposedly innate, shared human desire to understand ourselves and others. But scholars in other disciplines have challenged this essentializing approach by studying how empathy is intricately ensnared in broader meta-narratives that have been socially constructed such that certain actions (and the people who do them) are privileged over others. The exultation of empathy as an “authentic” mode of relationship-building within service-learning

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draws upon the common assumption that in order for people to be moved to action, they have to make personal a problem that would otherwise feel too complex or foreign to grasp. Global crises that may seem distant and immaterial to an American audience, it is presumed, can be made meaningful to that audience through a subjective experience that elicits an emotional response.

Within service-learning, this manifests in the assumption that students must witness poverty and injustice to “know” about the problem and become part of the community working to solve it. Service-learning programs promote the idea that, without an intimate connection to an injustice (embodied through interpersonal relationships), students will not feel responsible for taking action against injustice and inequality. This idea, critical theorists suggest, is problematic. As Lauren Berlant argues, “[T]he very emphasis on feeling that radicalizes the sentimental critique also muffles the solutions it often imagines or distorts and displaces them from the places toward which they ought to be redirected.”

Narrative appeals to empathy, I argue, link service-learning philosophies to the ideological foundations of forms of neo-racism. Scholarship on slavery and abolition offers clear critiques of the role of white paternalistic “empathizers” in sentimental abolitionist literature. Slave narratives were an early example of this attempt to deploy narrative to spark social change by triggering empathy. By bringing together nineteenth-century portrayals of slavery with

present day service learning programs, I am questioning the necessity of representing structures and systems of power through story in order to foster empathy with the intent of social transformation. Is empathy the best strategy for combating racism and rectifying white privilege? How do narratives of interpersonal relationships that are meant to depict empathy as radically transformative instead obscure the complex power imbalances that led to injustice in the first place?

Additionally, I historicize empathy by placing its institutional deployments in conversation with colonial discourse. In particular, I examine universities’ development and propagation of service-learning programs as neo-colonial projects, which reinscribe cultures as distinctly different entities, hierarchize them according to “need,” and exploit their resources for participants’ edification. Despite scholarship on service learning that emphasizes the benefits that such programs offer to communities, service-learning is in fact primarily concerned with outcomes for students. As a result, American universities establish community partnerships and create infrastructure across the globe that cater to their students’ needs while sidelining those of the local residents. Universities justify these programs by arguing for the necessity of cultural competence as a life-skill and resume-builder; with this international experience, students are marked as global citizens with the capacity and skills to intervene in global affairs. Colleges and universities have become neo-colonial institutions because of the ways in which they have divided the globe into areas designated for study abroad and those who would benefit from service-learning assistance. Generally,
these programs, and education abroad by extension, have reaffirmed who “gives” and who “receives” under the guise of a framework grounded in empathic solidarity and interpersonal relationships.

In partial response to these inquiries, I propose here a critical examination of the deployment of empathy—and by extension, affect and sentiment—in order to better understand the effects of service learning in our current moment. Looking specifically at one program offered at Fordham University, I draw attention to these effects of service-learning programs specifically at Jesuit universities. Through a brief survey of empathy studies, I explore a tension between scholars who view empathy as radically transformative, tied to altruistic behavior and fostering intersubjectivity, and scholars who situate empathy within violent histories of slavery and colonization and examine its role in (re)producing hierarchies of power. I draw from postcolonial studies broadly to advance my claim that the anti-racist strategies proposed by service-learning initiatives are predicated on an updated version of colonial projects, one that relies on formulations of cultures as discrete and pure entities in order to dominate and exploit Others. I argue that by historicizing the current debate over empathy within histories of slavery and colonialism, we can better understand why it is problematic that service-learning programs are marketed within the university setting as the best way to gain cultural competency, become a “global citizen,” and work towards social justice.
CHAPTER 2

SERVICE-LEARNING AND THE LIBERAL NARRATIVE OF EMPATHY

Service-Learning: An Overview

Although service-learning can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, service-learning programs have become increasingly popular and have gained broad support over the past several decades. In 1964, President Johnson created VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), which placed volunteers throughout the United States to fight poverty through work with organizations, communities, and individuals. VISTA was initially conceived by President John F. Kennedy in 1963 who established the Peace Corps two years earlier and sought to design a domestic program, but was implemented by Johnson as part of his “War on Poverty.” VISTA eventually became a semi-independent organization in 1993 when it was folded into AmeriCorps. In the early 1970s, the federal government opened the National Center for Service Learning, sparking colleges and universities to create their own programs to promote student-led community engagement. A significant moment in the development of service-learning was the formation of Campus Compact: The Project for Public and Community Service in 1985, a consortium among college and university presidents who committed to promoting public service as part of undergraduate education. This consortium has been a major catalyst for the development of service-learning
programs in higher education.\textsuperscript{8} Finally, the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 led to further expansion and development of these programs. The 1993 Act, in particular, set up the “Corporation for National Service, which funds service-learning programs under its Learn and Serve Grants, as well as the AmeriCorps program, which allows students to receive assistance with college tuition in exchange for a year or two of service to the community” after graduation.\textsuperscript{9}

Scholars and educators attribute the intellectual and pedagogical origins of service learning primarily to American philosopher John Dewey who contemplated the role of education in his 1900 book \textit{The School and Society}. When Dewey wrote this book, he was concerned about the growing social and economic upheaval at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century. In \textit{The School and Society}, he promoted the importance of experiential education and argued that schools should act as models of democracy by exposing students to divergent experiences and instilling values of cooperation. Concerned that children were no longer being naturally trained through their home life, Dewey proposed that schools should become the child’s new learning “habitat” in preparation to participate fully in society.\textsuperscript{10}

Such musings on the role of education continued in the early twentieth century and were not confined to the United States. In South America, Paulo

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\textsuperscript{8} Wutzdorf & Giles, “Service Learning in Higher Education.”
\textsuperscript{9} Wutzdorf & Giles, “Service Learning in Higher Education,” 108.
\textsuperscript{10} John Dewey, \textit{The School and Society} (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1900), 32.
\end{flushleft}
Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasized education that aimed to empower those who were economically and socially oppressed. In the introduction to the 50th anniversary edition of Freire’s book, Richard Shaull summarizes one of Freire’s key insights on the radical potential of education:

> Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.11

Due to their emphasis on learning-by-doing, empowerment through education, and radical pedagogy, both Dewey and Freire are often portrayed as the forefathers of service-learning and are frequently cited in service-learning scholarship.

In today’s scholarship, definitions of service-learning vary widely, but generally include any “educational activity, program, or curriculum that seeks to promote student learning through experiences associated with volunteerism or community service.”12 Janet S. Eyler and Dwight E. Giles, Jr., two of the leading service-learning scholars and foundational thinkers, define service-learning as:

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11 Richard Schaul, Publisher’s Foreword to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, written by Paulo Freire (New York: Continuum, 1970), 11.
a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students . . . seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves. In the process, students link personal and social development with academic and cognitive development. . . experience enhances understanding; understanding leads to more effective action.  

As a community engagement pedagogy, service-learning combines educational goals and community service with the objective of fostering growth for both students and communities. While some educators highlight service-learning as a form of experiential education that bolsters learning in the classroom, others emphasize service-learning as an exercise in democratic participation.

Ideally, for Eyler and Giles, service-learning placements would involve students doing meaningful work that produces something of value and allows them to work directly with their community partner(s) for a sustained period of time. Eyler and Giles find other benefits of service-learning as well, such as: the development of critical thinking skills, a sense of personal identity, a reduction in stereotypical beliefs, and growth in inter-cultural understanding. Although they include lengthy lists of personal, learning, social, and career-related outcomes for students, their section on community benefits is noticeably lacking.

Organizational and community benefits are exclusively tied to the students either

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in terms of finding “satisfaction with student participation” or gaining the “valuable human resources needed to achieve community goals.” Similarly, Kahne and Westheimer point out how educators and legislators maintain that service-learning can invigorate the classroom, promote self-esteem, and even improve the community but they offer far less tangible outcomes for the community in comparison with those listed for students. Thus, within a quick survey of educational scholarship on service-learning, it becomes evident that scholars find it much easier to measure student benefits than organizational or community ones, highlighting that these programs are designed first and foremost with student needs in mind.

Despite the relative dearth of literature documenting outcomes for communities, service-learning scholarship frequently posits that students’ development of empathy will lead to future action and social change. Educational scholars commonly claim that “participating in service-learning helps students develop empathy for their fellow human beings.” These programs are founded on a desire to help others and to reflect on that service. In her discussion of immersion trips undertaken by international development institutions, Pedwell outlines the desired goal such programs have for students to move “from empathy, to self-transformation, to recognition of responsibility or obligation, to

14 Ibid.
action with the potential to contribute to wider social change.”\textsuperscript{17} Service-learning programs similarly often present such personal transformations as their objective. In fact, administrators describe empathy as the most significant emotional outcome within a structure that is designed to promote self-transformation and interpersonal connection. As Pedwell explains, “It is the ‘unsettling’ experience of empathy on the part of ‘privileged’ subjects that is understood to carry the potential to produce radical self-transformation.”\textsuperscript{18}

However, the assertion that students will feel a particular emotion such as empathy and then channel that empathy into productive, positive activity, is based on assumption rather than evidence. For example, in their analysis of study abroad programming, Laliberte and Waddell found that “students interpreted their experiences of frustration and disappointment in a manner which left their own privilege unchallenged by reinforcing the expectation that others should do the messy work of relationship building and negotiation for them.”\textsuperscript{19} Laliberte and Waddell analyzed a study abroad program that primed students through pre-departure meetings and program materials to expect positive feelings during their trip. However, in their study, students reported feeling a wide range of “bad” feelings, like shame and guilt when confronted with their privilege, that led them to avoid certain situations that might elicit those emotions. Laliberte and Waddell additionally discuss students who turn their frustrations into critiques directed against the program’s structure, but never question their own complicity.

\textsuperscript{17} Pedwell, \textit{Affective Relations}, 80.
\textsuperscript{18} Pedwell, \textit{Affective Relations}, 81.
\textsuperscript{19} Laliberté and Waddell, "Feeling Our Way," 89.
as program participants. Similarly, service-learning programs depict the expansion of empathy as the key learning objective necessary to ensure participants’ subsequent willingness to take action against injustice, but often fail to address what happens if students either do not develop empathy for those they are interacting with or if students do develop empathy but still retain their pre-existing stereotypes or expectations. Program administrators may even completely neglect other emotions that students may experience that could contribute to either positive or negative outcomes.

Although scholarship on service-learning focuses largely on its liberatory, radical potential for collective action and social change, most service done through these programs is actually apolitical in nature. For example, Christopher Koliba argues that “service learning should best be conceived as a set of practices and principles that provide students and community partners with the tools for participation, even if it does less to inspire actual political action than many of its practitioners hope and aspire to.” Instead of emphasizing political objectives, service-learning often revolves around the development of certain skills and strategies. Educators and administrators appear to view students’ personal transformation as the primary outcome despite their sweeping claims of political action and community benefits. In most cases, this takes the form of stressing charity and service over social justice. Colleges and universities promulgate narratives of kindness and empathy as ways of avoiding politics and
policy, appealing to people across various political and ideological spectrums. In some service-learning programs, administrators and educators endorse charity as an alternative to politics, a means of supposedly stepping beyond the traditional governmental structure to enact real change without the attendant bureaucracy. For institutions of higher education, depicting service as a charitable act also allows them to maintain a “neutral” political position. Charity acts as a common denominator across the political spectrum for administrators and educators because it promotes personal responsibility over collective action and obscures the need for public sector initiatives. In that sense, service learning’s focus on charity is not in fact politically neutral. Rather the emphasis on charity as a radical act can foreclose other potentially more radical possibilities.

The institutional prioritization of apolitical, individual action over public-sector initiatives mirrors the broader neoliberal movement away from public resources and towards personal and corporate responsibility. Emerging in the later twentieth century, service-learning programs found their footing at the same time as neoliberal discourses and policies took hold. Neoliberalism according to educational scholar Novella Zett Keith, “takes the central tenets of free market economics and makes them into general principles for creating the good life and good society.” Dion Dennis characterizes an incipient neoliberalism as “a

celebration of an ethos of hyper-competition and radical individualism,” and notes its development as, "concurrent with the initial rise of North American educational discourses and practices known as civic engagement and service learning.”

Dennis argues that this early version of neoliberalism manifests in later neoliberal ideologies and governmentalities that facilitated the state’s retreat from direct provision of social services and supports: “In responsibilizing citizens as moral subjects and local social control agents in their communities, all sorts of state-private partnerships emerge, for the delivery of public goods and services, and new governmentalities emerge, to create requisite notions of the ‘responsible citizen’ via the installation and use of concomitant surveillance/audit mechanisms.”

In this context, public colleges and universities began to act like capitalistic enterprises, cushioned by public support, through their treatment of students as products to be molded for the university’s own future benefit.

Additionally, community engagement became a type of corporate brand for neoliberal universities by lending a positive public image, attracting funders, and alluring and retaining students. Thus, service-learning programs can be seen as a Foucauldian site of governance in which students develop civic identities as service providers that align with state efforts essentially to privatize welfare.

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Emerging in tandem with the growing promotion of education abroad as a form of global citizenship, service-learning programs are promoted as creating opportunities to be exposed to different cultures and are designed to be immersive and experiential. In placing so much emphasis on cultural distinctiveness (coded language for racial difference), Caton and Santos argue that these programs suggest “notions of racial purity and cultural authenticity, which imply a lack of contact and influence between cultures.” When cultures are imagined as pure, discrete, and internally coherent, they are seen as essentially different and removed from the “West.” Yet, histories of imperialism, forced migration, displacement, dispossession, and slavery complicate the imagined existence of bounded, closed systems. Even the most unassuming definitions and models of culture (e.g. as a “way of life”) are inseparable from formulations of race. Defining or describing culture fundamentally requires observation and description, and this cannot operate without evaluation and judgement; there is always already a hierarchy in place. Such hierarchies are sustained because the notion of “progress” is tied to capitalism, production, and consumption. Indeed, this idea of progress is crucial for service-learning ideology which has become increasingly modeled on culturally immersive tourism.

29 See e.g. Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
Postcolonial scholarship has demonstrated how these programs not only maintain oppressive power relations between host and visitor, but perpetuate a tourist gaze that leads “tourists to notice separation, otherness, and difference, while often neglecting to see how places are intimately bound to other economies, nations, and peoples.”  

The very marketing of “culture” is itself an asset for tourism that nations ascribe to and utilize for their own benefit. The inequalities of access to these programs, the perpetuation of neoliberal agendas, and the focus on global citizenship as a marketable asset are often obscured within discussions of education abroad, especially when advertised as possessing a service-learning component. For example, in his analysis of study abroad programs, Anthony Ogden argues that the increasing rate of students studying abroad is causing universities to develop an “education abroad infrastructure that essentially perpetuates a colonial student gaze, borrowing from John Urry’s postmodern notion of the ‘tourist gaze.’” Ogden discusses how these structures cater to the privileged position of the American student and disregard the needs of the local residents, thus establishing a colonial-like presence that exploits resources and commodifies culture. He argues that these institutions create a “colonial system” in which “colonial students” become the “creators and proprietors of their own cultural experiences.” This system then perpetuates the notion that a local

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31 Sharpe, “Colonialist Tendencies in Education Abroad,” 230.
33 Ogden, “The View from the Veranda,” 47.
culture or place can be manipulated or commoditized for their privilege, acting as an American microcosm on foreign land. While the infrastructure mimics colonial administration, the system also repeats certain relational dynamics. Ogden identifies the “colonial student” as one who yearns to be abroad and gain practical skills, but has a sense of entitlement regarding their experience. He comments, “To a certain extent, the colonial student is more at ease observing the people, places, and culture from protective boundaries without actually experiencing any discomfort.”

The colonial student thus stands on the “veranda” and looks out on the culture from a distance, retaining a position of superiority, authority, and entitlement. That distance, which prevents feelings of discomfort, upholds the colonial structure.

Although Ogden is examining the rise of study abroad in connection to a colonial discourse concerned with elitism and consumption, his conclusions can be applied to service-learning programs, especially international ones. Finding similar evidence, educational scholars Paula Mellon and Socorro Herrera also acknowledge the difficulty of getting students in international service-learning programs to shed the presumption that their cultural norms are “right” and that their presence is desired by their host community.

In contrast to the Ogden’s “colonial student,” those who participate in service-learning often seek out

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34 Ogden, “The View from the Veranda,” 44.
relationships with local residents and come to feel a strong identification with their host community by the end of their program. However, the design of these programs already inherently structures and complicates these relationships. As discussed earlier, there is a tension in service-learning programs created as administrators seek to control students’ exposure and experience in order to ensure that they have a positive reaction to any potential discomfort, alienation, or shame they might feel. This management of emotions once again privileges the American student over that of the socioeconomic reality of the host community. Despite their self-professed claim to challenge participants’ privilege and provide insight into myriad injustices, service-learning programs deploy affective discourses and sentimental appeals in ways that belie how these programs contribute to the production of a certain kind of stereotypical difference and the reinforcement of colonialist stereotypes. Generally, these programs reinforce the power dynamics of who gives and who receives instead of deconstructing the historical socio-economic relations that have precipitated those dynamics.

**Fordham’s Global Outreach: A Case Study**

Fordham University’s particular service-learning initiative, Global Outreach (GO!), began in the 1950s as a project working exclusively within Mexico. It took on both its name and its international scope in 1988. It has since grown to include partner organizations throughout the United States, Asia, Africa, Latin
America, and Europe and now offers over 30 projects operating during winter, summer, and spring breaks. As a cultural immersion and service program focusing on “systems of inequality and injustice,” “each project shares the ultimate goals of creating solidarity, learning about issues of poverty and injustice, and connecting local and global realities.” Students are thus, according to the Global Outreach handbook, not asked to fight against poverty and injustice, but to learn about those issues and about how the local and global connect. While the website supplies information for potential applicants, the GO! Handbook is the main resource for participants, documenting the core values and beliefs of the organization, the structure of the projects, tips for success, and guidelines that all participants must follow. The structure of each project involves several key components: a student leader who is responsible for choosing the team, contacting the service site, organizing team meetings, and coordinating group activities; an adult, volunteer chaperone who ideally is a GO! alum; the Global Outreach Board comprised of undergraduate students who make decisions regarding GO! policies; and, the GO! staff who run the day-to-day operations, keep financial records, train the leaders and chaperones, oversee the Board, and work with the university. Although faculty may act as chaperones, they are not otherwise involved with Global Outreach.

Additionally, the handbook outlines three distinct phases for each project: preparation, immersion, and follow-up. During the preparation stage, each team

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is required to hold weekly, mandatory meetings where they discuss “societal, economic, political, religious, and educational structures present” in the communities and locations they will be visiting. Although the actual trip is seen as the most transformative part of the process, it is understood that it would be rendered ineffective without the weekly meetings and retreats in the lead-up to departure. The intellectual and emotional labor performed during this time functions to theoretically mitigate the very real power dynamics that will inevitably emerge once the trip has begun. It is implied that if one gives enough careful thought to these issues and makes it abundantly clear that they are aware of their privilege, that good intentions alone can erase the structures of difference upon which a program such as this is founded.

From my own experience, much of the preparation involves bracing oneself for the unsettling discomfort the trip will supposedly provoke. Such constant reminders and warnings about being supposedly immersed in a drastically new and different environment (whether abroad or domestically) rests upon certain assumptions about those who participate in these projects. What happens when students live in the very place to which their team travels? How does that change expectations and goals? What does that suggest about how educators and administrators construct not only their ideas about these service-learning sites, but also their imaginings of who the “typical” participant is?

Although concrete data regarding the demographics and statistics of GO!

participants is difficult to obtain, we can guess the typical make-up based on the general demographics of Fordham itself. Today slightly more than half of the 9,599 undergraduates at Fordham are white. The percentage of white students on campus is nearly four times highest than the two groups with the second-highest percentages (Latino and Asian, 14%). International students account for 9% of the student body, multi-racial and African-American students form only 4%, and Native American students comprise less than 1%. The general demographics at Fordham suggest that the typical participant is likely white. However, I am also questioning what happens when a participant falls outside of this norm, when a participant is not typical. Through decisions on where the trips should travel and what issues should be foregrounded, educators and administrators are already envisioning a certain type of student who will be participating. What are the consequences and effects for students who might live in one of these places and/or experience injustice(s)? The program’s emphasis on traveling to an unknown place assumes that its students are not already part of that community. Yet, students might actually choose trips because the place or injustice is personal to them. How might this shift the objectives of service-learning? How might it challenge or undermine its very foundations? Because educators and administrators imagine a white, middle-class participant, service-learning programs fail to tackle these questions.

The GO! Handbook opens with the following aspirational message, which is stated as a fact:

> Your experience will change you, and you will need to be prepared for the change. You should expect to grow in your knowledge of an unfamiliar culture as well as in your understanding of your own identity. You are accompanying each community and building relationships of mutual reciprocity and responsibility. **You are not there in a higher position but rather a position of equality.**

Through this equality, new relationships are formed, boundaries are broken down, and stereotypes are erased.39

This language implies a willful forgetfulness that inequalities precede any humanitarian encounter and that face-to-face interactions do not cause these inequalities to suddenly disappear. Even for participants who are not typically coded as white or as individuals with varying privileges, there is an extent to which these participants assume whiteness and power through their position as colonizer in these specific encounters. To some degree, Global Outreach does appear cognizant of this fact: the handbook emphasizes that participants are challenged to question their own values and examine their privilege, affirming that “one of the core principles. . . is learning the importance of **social justice and working towards achieving justice for all people.**”40 Yet, only a few paragraphs later, “the primary goal of the project” is stated: “that [participants’]
knowledge, sensitivity, and compassion will increase as a result of [their] experience. . . [and] a commonality of human experience will become apparent that crosses cultural, language, and economic boundaries." 41 Throughout the document, the program vacillates between language regarding concrete action rooted in social justice and sentimental discourse predicated on the supposedly transformative power of empathy. I believe this suggests an underlying issue with service-learning programs generally: the very form, structure, and legacy of such initiatives necessitate a sentimental rhetoric to promote its mission in a way that is legible and digestible for its typically liberal, white audience.

While I would argue that the conclusions drawn from this analysis are broadly applicable to service-learning in general, my analysis of a specific program at a Jesuit university necessitates a focus on its religious aspects. The affective and sentimental discourse that I am studying is a feature of all service-learning programs, but it has particular resonances, meanings, and connections within a religious context. As a program operated by a Jesuit university, Global Outreach is "modeled on the Jesuit tradition of service." 42 In his dissertation on international cultural immersion and the Jesuit mission, Stephen Belt discusses how the very story of St. Ignatius’ pilgrimage to the Holy Land, during which he sacrificed his material possessions, prayed, begged for food, and served the sick, mirrors the experiences of service-learning programs. 43 The characteristic

41 Ibid., 4.
42 Ibid., 3.
values of the Society of Jesus—experience, discernment, mission, and education—align easily with the outcomes and pedagogy of service-learning, which emphasizes reflection, experiential education, and helping those in need. Additionally, Belt mentions the scholarship of several key figures in the Jesuit tradition whose work makes clear the connections between Jesuit principles and service-learning pedagogy. The most well-known figure, Pedro Arrupe, S.J., is mentioned several times within the Global Outreach handbook. He forges one of the most recognizable characterizations of Jesuit education, men-and-women-for-others, that manifests as selflessness in action, a life lived for others. Arrupe believed that justice was achieved through love and that liberation could only be brought about through love of God and love of thy neighbor.

Reminiscent of my earlier discussion of the justifications for service-learning, Jesuit leader Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J. has promoted the idea that “personal involvement with innocent suffering. . . is the catalyst for solidarity which then gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection.”44 In his 2000 keynote address at a conference entitled “Commitment to Justice in Jesuit Higher Education,” Kolvenbach envisions education of the “whole person” through direct experience with the poor, a sentiment which is clearly echoed by Global Outreach’s statement that the “actions of the Jesuit University should be on behalf of the poor.”45 As mentioned earlier, this again presumes that the subject

being educated is not poor. Although a particular focus on the poor has long been a feature of Catholic social teaching, Pedro Arrupe specifically refocused the Society of Jesus with an emphasis on serving the poor and an insistence that their ministry should be involved in the political struggle of the poor during his service as Superior General.\textsuperscript{46} An analysis of why such particular attention is directed towards the poor is not possible within this essay, but I do find it important because the Global Outreach handbook mirrors this language by often upholding poverty as the most pressing form of inequality and injustice. I’m inclined to read this focus on the poor in the context of service-learning as a potential method of avoiding an acknowledged discussion of racial issues—although race and racism are undoubtedly an integral aspect of poverty.

An analysis of the relationship between vows of poverty, an emphasis on serving the poor, and missionary work is important, especially for understanding service-learning programs at religious institutions. A focus on poverty reflects a mission directed towards the alleviation of poverty, but it can also take the form of a prescription to live a life devoid of material things. Furthermore, poverty tends to be represented in ways that reify it as a holy state of being. There is, of course, the primary visage of Christ suffering and dying on the cross for all of his children, but there are also reifications of suffering as the path to redemption within the Beatitudes with lines such as ”Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” and ”Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be

satisfied." The Bible positions the poor, the hungry, the meek, and the oppressed as the most worthy because of their earthly, material suffering and promises them salvation and redemption in the eternal glory of heaven. However, pain and suffering are not indicators of an individual’s closeness to God but are instead, according to scholar Sara Ahmed, “effects of socio-economic relations of violence and poverty.”

According to Jesuit teachings, those with the least amount of goods and wealth simultaneously occupy a holy space towards which we should strive and an earthly condition that needs to be remedied. I would suggest that viewing poverty as a state of being instead of as a socioeconomic status has real implications for how service-learning programs at Jesuit institutions approach poverty as a social injustice.

We can see how a glorification of the poor is embodied within Global Outreach through its pillar of “simple living.” According to the handbook, teams are asked to “live simple lifestyles that promote personal relationships over material possessions, ultimately allowing for a more in-depth cultural immersion” while on the trip. During the trip, students are expected to mimic the living conditions experienced by those around them. For example, on a trip to North Camden, New Jersey, participants were put through the Welfare Food Exercise which required them to live off a daily budget of $9 to $12 for a family of four—approximately the same amount received from the U.S. government food stamp

Generally, this policy plays out primarily by restricting students from travelling with any electronic devices, limiting students’ water usage, simplifying meals, and living in basic housing accommodations. One of the obvious issues here is the provisional nature of the activity; students “experience” food insecurity for a week with the constant assurance that their hunger is only temporary. Fundamentally, however, this lesson also dangerously equates poverty with simple living when the former is a material state lying at the intersection of multi-faceted social, political, and economic conditions and the latter is an individual choice to prioritize interpersonal relations over earthly goods. From personal experience, I can attest that the notion of “simple living” often results in students’ spending the duration of the trip complaining about their lack of phone, food, and creature comforts while also somehow believing that they are truly “experiencing” poverty. Of course, my brief critique here is a vast oversimplification; in many ways, helping others and living simply is an admirable endeavor. However, my aim is to demonstrate how Catholicism often offers material aid to those it designates as worthy of redemption both in this life and the next, while precluding any indictment of the existing socio-economic structures by glorifying the poor, and to highlight how these social teachings are executed in the case of a particular service-learning program at a Jesuit university.

Additionally, images of poverty are one of the most common representations of pain and suffering deployed by missionary orders and non-profit organizations. The visible representation is seen as crucial for evoking compassion and acquiring humanitarian aid, justified by the assumption that people need to witness poverty before being compelled to act for its eradication. Such images of poverty and suffering are also representative of the connections between service-learning, volunteer work, and international humanitarian aid. Much like humanitarian or non-profit campaigns that circulate images of emaciated, barefoot children in “Africa,” Fordham similarly distributes images of poverty as a means of soliciting donations and galvanizing support for its mission. A news article published in the university-run online newspaper documents one group’s trip to Cape Town, highlighting the places at which the students worked, the people they met, and their reflections on the trip.51 Included throughout the text are photos taken by the students, but the main photo is Fordham students interacting with South African children outside. While the white Fordham students are dressed in athletic gear emblazoned with the university logo, most of the children in the picture are standing barefoot. Additionally, the photo is taken at such an angle that invisible line appears, dividing the Fordham students on one side from the children on the other. As a service-learning program, Global Outreach is likely more cognizant of its visual representations, yet students, educators, and staff clearly still fall prey to relying on images of

poverty and injustice that ultimately perpetuate stereotypical notions of difference.

Through such representations of pain and suffering, service-learning programs primarily invoke comparisons with the legacies of missionary work. Anthropologists Redfield and Bornstein explain how, through its missionary work, “Christianity played a particular role in the emergence of both the aid world and the secular order of institutions that surround it.” In spreading its mission and offering up social services, all are supposedly equally deserving according to models of Christianity, but there is nevertheless a judgement made on the worth and value of those who receive Christian “good works.” This is asserted by religious institutions that enforce prayer, spiritual development, and a strict adherence to religious moral codes as a prerequisite to receiving aid. Thus, only certain people are deserving of charity and must remain virtuous to continue to be deserving. Similar assessments of who is most in need, and what injustices are most important, have shaped decisions regarding where service-learning projects occur, what types of organizations Fordham partners with, and what kind of issues are highlighted. Finally, critics argue, Christianity has a fundamental “investment in discourses and practices that draw divisions between social groups.”


Pedwell, *Affective Relations*, 32.

*Variations*, Terence Keel explores the connection between the development of scientific ideas of race and religious ways of knowing by arguing “that modern scientists construct race and explain the origins of human variation by transferring the creative power of God onto nature, biology, and genetics.”55 However, I am most interested here in his early chapters on the establishment of Christianity being founded upon racial exclusion of certain groups. He explains that Christianity “as a belief system that transcends race. . . [was] forged initially in opposition to Jews, Greeks, and Romans and then subsequently against racial and religious others (e.g. Muslims, Native Americans, Africans, Asians, Catholics).”56 Particularly, the racialization of Jews “helped clarify the borders between Christian and non-Christian identity.”57 Christianity essentially requires in a sense a “transformation from one descent group, tribe, people, or citizenship to a new and better one.”58 Therefore, while it is “widely believed by Christians and those who share its cultural heritage that to be a member of the body of Christ is to transcend racial differences and ascend into a universally inclusive community,” it becomes increasingly evident that Christianity is invested in social division and hierarchy.59

Despite the myriad issues I have outlined, Fordham continues to grow its service-learning initiatives. It continues to boast how many hours of service its students log and how many pursue post-graduate years of service in order to

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56 Ibid., 9.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid., 8.
59 Ibid., 7.
market itself as an institution that cares for the formation of empathetic, globally-minded, civically-engaged individuals who are bothered by the injustice they see around them. Through self-professed self-awareness of the problems inherent in service-learning, Fordham explains its continued promotion of these programs in the conclusion of the GO! handbook:

In the end, it's very easy to see that we in fact are benefitting and learning much more from the experience than actually making any significant improvements or changes to the community or the lives of the people we work with. While this can be an uncomfortable idea, it should not be too discouraging. By being aware of this going into the project, we can do our best to focus on understanding the issues, the importance of the community’s perspective, and being informed in our own daily lives. Take what you learn from immersing yourself in the culture and let it impact you.60

Such statements about the impact of service learning projects were echoed by students who were asked to discuss what they took away from their experience and whose responses were published in the university-run online newspaper. One student said upon returning from North Camden, New Jersey, “‘What we’ve discovered is that. . . we are not here to change Camden. Camden is here to change us.’”61 Another specifically affirmed the necessity of the

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immersive, interpersonal aspect of her trip to Mexico by recalling one particularly fond relationship: “We were able to learn more about the culture of his community because we had that close connection. He took us to meet his cousin, who owns a taquería. I don’t think we could have done that otherwise.”

Finally, a chaperone additionally confirmed the transformation that students undergo: “The students that go, they are really affected,’ she said. ‘Once you enter into the world of the ‘other’ and talk and meet and hear stories, you are different. You put the face to the name and it is incredible.’” Statements like these make clear that service-learning programs tap into sentimental, affective constructions of radical change predicated on empathic solidarity. At the outset, the program’s deployment of social justice rhetoric appears particularly mindful, self-aware, and transparent yet it is this very rhetoric that precludes any critical examination of the assumptions on which these programs operate. In utilizing ideas of solidarity, allyship, and social justice, Global Outreach strategically extricates itself from its own institutional power. Thus, there is no reflective criticism of the way in which empathy is positioned as the premier mode of gathering authentic and real “knowledge” via direct encounters with racialized others that fundamentally works to reaffirm various transnational and postcolonial affective relations.

CHAPTER 3

EMPATHY STUDIES: ON EMOTION, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND AFFECT

Empathy

The recurring call-to-action narratives that invoke empathy, evident in the materials advertising service-learning programs, follow well-worn channels of the history of power relations built into the liberal Othering-by-helping dynamic. The literature on empathy that I will briefly outline in this chapter reveals a singular focus on the transformative pathos of empathy that, while approached in divergent contexts and disciplines, still situates the individual as the primary site of investigation. To counteract this dominant framing, I will conclude this section reviewing scholars of affect and sentiment who have instead interrogated empathy as a public, political, and historicized entity. These scholars have demonstrated that we cannot separate bodily sensation, emotion, and thought into distinct realms of experience. Ultimately, I want to question why we place so much emphasis and critical importance on empathy and furthermore, why it is so frequently laid out as the roadmap for social change within liberal anti-racist rhetoric.

The overall literature about empathy is large and inconclusive as to what exactly “it” is. Service-learning programs primarily view empathy as it was defined by legal scholar Lynne Henderson, and that is as the “foundational phenomenon for intersubjectivity, which is not absorption by the other, but rather
simply the relationship of self to other, individual to community.”\textsuperscript{64} Though rooted in the individual, empathy does not only operate on a personal level: as Pedwell writes, “empathy is both the emotional ingredient that binds us together as human subjects and communities and the affective panacea to a wide range of social, political and economic divisions and grievances.”\textsuperscript{65} The belief that institutions, hierarchies of power, and social crises can be—to quote Pedwell again—“addressed affectively through practices of empathetic imagination, perspective-taking and engagement” is, as I argue in this paper, a particular liberal narrative of empathy.\textsuperscript{66} According to philosopher Martha Nussbaum, empathy as a habit practiced consistently in the service of building community and strengthening relationships is the basis of social reform. “Empathic imagining” remains “an invaluable way of extending our ethical awareness and of understanding the human meaning of events and policies.”\textsuperscript{67} Empathy is thus framed, by certain scholars, as a means of healing nations and transforming our transnational and multicultural world into a harmonious network of interdependency.

Yet, empathy as social reform nevertheless plays out on an interpersonal level. Its transformative power still appears to lie in its revelation of the self through revelation of the Other. For Edith Stein, empathy is viewed as a

\textsuperscript{65} Pedwell, \textit{Affective Relations}, 94.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
prerequisite for both knowledge of others and of the self. Stein felt empathy was an act of ideation through which we can systematically and comprehensively discern not only others’ spiritual types but our own.68 But, how do we come to know others? For some literary scholars, narrative is the bridge to understanding others and thus “knowing” them. Many believe that literature helps readers develop empathy for people different from themselves. While certain narratives may work to bring people together who recognize a shared experience, they can also produce alienation and distance. In order to provoke action, the narrative of empathy “must include the element of recognizing injustice which is a political and social condition, not only an existential one.”69 However, such narratives “affor[d] the pleasure of consuming the feeling of vicarious suffering,” through which readers come to occupy a moral high ground by wishing to do the right thing and feeling virtuous about possessing that moral desire.70 For this reason, empathy can become dangerous by placating the privileged and obscuring a shameful complicity with the social and political structures that engender the violence producing this oppression.71 Furthermore, while there is an idealistic hope that emotional connection manifested through empathy will lead to social action, empathy often instead results in a sense of entitlement towards others’ experiences.72

70 Woodward, “Calculating Compassion, 235.
71 Jurecic, “Empathy and the Critic.”
72 Amy Shuman, Other People’s Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).
In “Rodrigo’s Eleventh Chronicle,” critical race theorist Richard Delgado puts forth two main observations: 1) empathy is highly limited and 2) we think we have more empathy for the downtrodden than we actually do. Delgado finds that “liberal empathy is often false, misdirected, or solipsistic.” It tends to make its possessors overconfident and results in paternalism. Delgado explains how in our visualizations for helping others, we tend to privilege a solution that helps ourselves. In other words, we end up substituting our own goals in place of what others need or want. Delgado offers the example of a church group feeding the hungry, but forcing them to pray first. In this instance, an individual seeking food needs only food to satisfy their hunger, but the church implements a solution that falls in line with their mission by requiring prayer first. The church sets a condition upon its offering that works to its benefit. This occurs across a variety of social service and nonprofit sectors where aid is only granted upon certain conditions being met, a filtration system that works to weed out the “worthy” from the “unworthy.” This is the basis of Delgado’s false empathy—that it is often grounded entirely in white priorities and experience. Delgado even argues that the white liberal truly believes that they are identifying with a person of color but are doing so only in a superficial way. In Delgado’s estimation, empathy is a cosmetic balm to racism that prevents definitive action from being taken.

However, the construction of empathy within white anti-racist rhetoric can have far more insidious consequences. Contemporary white anti-racism,

according to Binkley, “represents a broad constellation of expert discourses and institutional practices centered on new ways of knowing about race, manifested in the imperative to better relate to, understand, and empathize with members of marginalized racial groups.” Binkley’s version of white anti-racism induces a sensitivity to cultural diversity and a tolerant recognition of difference. Binkley draws on Etienne Balibar’s theory of neo-racism in which Balibar posits that the dominant theme of modern racism is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences. Balibar states that culture functions as a version of nature by locking individuals and groups into a genealogy—an immutable determination—that is nevertheless located in the notion that there are biological causes and effects of culture and biological reactions to cultural difference. Additionally, Balibar clarifies that this new model of racism based on culture has always existed and is intimately tied to the construction of nationalism. Under Balibar’s model of neo-racism, Binkley’s anti-racism becomes implicitly defined by the ability to exercise empathy, to co-experience the emotional states of others, and to adopt temporarily the other’s point-of-view. White people are therefore seen as the interpreters of others, the empathizers, and the bearers of cultural competency. Drawing on Balibar, Binkley persuasively argues that anti-racism substitutes biological deficiency for a “psychic or existential wound” that is knowable through an enhanced act of empathy.

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76 Binkley, “Anti-Racism Beyond Empathy,” 185.
other words, the rhetoric authorizes or foregrounds empathic understanding by attributing profound and irreducible differences to racialized individuals and populations, aligning with discourses that construct otherness by presuming that profound, cultural difference divides people across the globe.

It is this construction of empathy as a form of knowledge gathered via direct experience that I am most interested in and that I find insidiously and ubiquitously deployed within the particular structure of service-learning programs. In her summary of this understanding of empathy, Carolyn Pedwell underscores how “empathy has been conceptualized as an affective mode or technique through which ‘we’ can come to know the cultural ‘other.’”\(^{77}\) She highlights the notion perpetuated by service-learning programs that “empathetic perspective-taking can promote cross-cultural dialogue and understanding that leads to political action in the interests of transnational social justice.”\(^{78}\) However, as Pedwell turns to her critique, there are complications that arise when emotion is seen as creating truth and empathy is “premised on amassing ‘accurate’ contextual knowledge of ‘the other.’”\(^{79}\) For the purposes of regulating, policing, and disciplining racialized others, neocolonial and neoliberal hegemons (e.g., the American university) design “affective technologies and psychologies. . . to produce increasingly ‘accurate’ knowledge of ‘cultural others.’”\(^{80}\) This reifies

\(^{77}\) Pedwell, *Affective Relations*, 123.
\(^{78}\) Ibid.
\(^{79}\) Ibid., 122.
\(^{80}\) Ibid., 120.
cultures as fixed and bounded entities and privileges the view of the colonizer (that is, the white middle class student).

**Epistemology**

How does one purportedly gain this “accurate” knowledge of others? In this thesis, I suggest that service-learning administrators and educators believe that direct, immersive experiences are the premier mode of encountering others, bearing witness to their material reality, and then embracing or creating new knowledge that can guide efforts at change. In his 2004 monograph, *Distant Suffering*, Luc Boltanski represents the prevalent yet dangerously insidious sentiment that what is inside is *real*, that the authentic self is manifested through the exteriorization of sentiment, and that it is precisely through the involuntary and unintentional aspect of emotion that “guarantees that it truly comes from the heart, from within, and consequently that it is really genuine.”81 Thus, Boltanski questionably argues that for the relationship of visitor and host, in any context, to be “real, authentic, and thereby *touching,*” it must emerge from “heart to heart, going from interiority to interiority.”82 First-person experience supposedly derives its authority from its claims to possess “authentic” sources of embodied knowledge. When these experiences are subsequently narrativized, they are relatively uncontested since knowledge from personal experience is regarded as more authentic because the narrator claims to only represent themselves. These

82 Ibid., 81.
types of narratives present themselves as the “authentic” and “truthful”
expression of interior emotion while at the same time re-inscribing liberal
individualist ideology. There is a tendency to forget that experience is already an
interpretation and in need of further interpretation. Because of the immediacy and
supposedly involuntary nature of emotional reaction, these narratives frequently
promote a natural, uncritical concept of experience in which owning a particular
identity entitles one to claim ownership of experience.

In Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins specifically advocates for
“lived experience as a criterion of meaning.”83 Collins’ black feminist
epistemology challenges the notion that formal education is the only way to gain
knowledge by theorizing that lived, embodied experience grants a specific
“wisdom” and positions a certain standpoint. She further elaborates that
“because knowledge comes from experience, the best way of understanding
another person’s ideas was to develop empathy and share the experiences that
led the person to form those ideas.”84 Rooted in a tradition of African humanism,
this ethics of caring works to re-integrate emotion and intellect as “central to the
knowledge validation process.”85 For Collins, “truth emerges through care.”86
Within the context of service-learning programs, however, the risk, for Pedwell, is
that empathy “functions less as an affective tool in service of social justice and
more as a technology of access, providing an ‘insider perspective’ on ‘the

83 Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of
84 Ibid., 170.
85 Ibid., 172.
86 Ibid., 173.
These immersive programs claim to offer a “pure, unmediated view of reality. . . unshaped by cognitive, cultural, or political frames.” It is not only that emotions are understood as truth, but that because “emotional knowledge is direct [and] natural (perhaps instinctual), [it is] therefore more legitimate (or real) than other ways of knowing.”

While standpoint epistemology has been employed by members of oppressed and marginalized communities, the relatively privileged spaces of service-learning programs have dangerously co-opted and recontextualized such work through rhetorical promotions of their student participants’ solidarity, allyship, and empathy, with and for the communities with which they engage. Within a service-learning environment that positions open dialogue and reflection as the key tools for transformation, the experience of empathy is seen by educators, administrators, and scholars as the means toward social change. Yet, that empathy instead often becomes the very objective itself. A rhetoric that positions empathy as epistemology risks foreclosing alternative imaginings of what social change might look like and what radical action can be taken, replacing it with a discursive atmosphere that rewards the performance of certain emotions as the height of social justice work. Empathy as epistemology thus obscures the material realities of injustice and oppression, distracts from rigorous structural critique, and falsely depicts emotion as simultaneously civically-minded but also apolitical.

87 Pedwell, Affective Relations, 84.
88 Ibid., 83.
89 Ibid.
Affect and Sentiment

While I have briefly surveyed some of the ways empathy is defined in various scholarly and political literatures, I am far more interested in analyzing how people and institutions imbue that signifier with meaning in different moments to communicate different things or accomplish particular aims. Although emotions are often cast as deeply personal, confined to the instinctual and the bodied, there are ways in which, like sentiment, they are public, shared, and socially constructed. Sara Ahmed’s framework of “affective economies” demonstrates how emotions “work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and collective.” For Ahmed, emotions do not originate within and move outward. Rather, it is through their circulation in specific social and political contexts that they gain value, produce signification, and work as a form of capital to “create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds.” Emotion has historically been heavily interiorized and cast as subjective, but “emotions become fetishized precisely through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation.” In a similar vein, Ann Laura Stoler theorizes that sentiment, in exposing the artifice created along the line between reason and emotion, is a deeply political grammar of feeling. In her words, “sentiments are in their very verbal utterances forms of appraisal and deliberative assessment.” As judgements, the very enactment of emotions like rage or shame are an

assessment in and of themselves. Stoler argues that emotion is a “verdict in formation,” marking who should act subordinate to whom, deciding who is to be pitied and who does the pitying, identifying who is allowed to transgress, and tapping into unspoken breaches of the social contract.  

Like Stoler and Ahmed, many affect theorists foreground the technologies of empathy over its definition in order to examine how it functions across different sites of power throughout space and time, with particular attention to colonial periods and slavery and abolition. For instance, studying sentiment, trauma, and narrative through literature, Lauren Berlant argues in “Poor Eliza” that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, written during a particularly visible moment of sentimental discourse, is the most effective and famous instance of the liberal narrative of compassion. By foregrounding sentimentality in her analysis of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Berlant reveals how the “[h]istory of slavery. . . [has] long distinguished modes of pain, pleasure, identity, and identification in the American culture industry” that imagines that witnessing and identifying with pain will somehow provoke social change. Berlant articulates how mass culture and consumerism rely upon the perceived power of aesthetics, embodied through the cultural attachment to and fascination towards *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to produce texts that can have world-altering consequences. She employs *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* specifically as an archive that represents the potential for a social revolution.

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embedded in an aesthetic work that makes and remakes subjects. Berlant describes how the promises of sentimental discourse—the inhabitation of an imaginary transcendent space—are only accessible through an individual’s identification with alterity that may completely change them. It is this possibility of change, viewed as either a threat or a fulfillment of its promise, that supposedly makes sentimentality so enticing.

Although service-learning programs cannot be classified as an aesthetic work, they are nevertheless imbued with a similar attachment to fantasy. There is a sense in which participants suspend their reality for a transcendent imaginary space in which social revolution is suddenly a possibility if they are willing to be radically changed themselves. As Berlant notes, this sentimental discourse is incredibly alluring because it offers satisfaction and pleasure. Sentimentality conjures up a fantasy of massive social upheaval that occurs almost instantaneously when true structural change does not.

The purpose of sentimental politics, according to Berlant, is “to see the individual effects of mass social violence as different from the causes, which are impersonal and depersonalizing.” However, “[b]ecause the ideology of truth cannot admit the nonuniversality of pain, its causes become all jumbled together and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy.” Sentimental culture effectively exploits apparently irreducible social differences in the project of acknowledging the

95 Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 648.
96 Ibid, 641. (emphasis in original)
97 Ibid., 641.
individual effects of mass violence and constructing a universal mode of suffering and pain. The result, for Berlant, is that “the very emphasis on feeling that radicalizes the sentimental critique also muffles the solutions it often imagines or distorts and displaces them from the places toward which they ought to be redirected.”

Additionally, in “Poor Eliza,” Berlant states, “In the U.S. a particular form of liberal sentimentality that promotes individual acts of identification based on collective group memberships has been conventionally deployed to bind persons to the nation through a universalist rhetoric not of citizenship per se but of the capacity for suffering and trauma at the citizen’s core.” Berlant describes repeatedly throughout her analysis of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* how racially, economically, and sexually divergent audiences are conjoined in a “shared mass of empathetic feeling.” Much of what Berlant discusses deals with desire and satisfaction—the pleasure that arises from giving in to redemptive fantasies. In the instance of developing a sense of national belonging, these narratives often bind individuals through their shared ability to feel compassion. Kathleen Woodward terms this the “liberal narrative of compassion,” predicated on scenes of suffering and pain, that upholds the “potential corrupting relation of unequal power between the one who suffers and the one who witnesses that suffering.”

98 Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 664.
99 Ibid, 636.
100 Ibid., 652.
Service-learning programs promote a similar individual identification with a larger group membership that is tied to pain and trauma. As we have seen, these programs are predicated on the assumption that witnessing others’ pain and suffering within the right setting and with the ability to discuss with others what is being seen will galvanize people towards enacting social change. The logic of such programs fundamentally rests on the idea that one must witness another’s pain to spark the desire for action. However, as Berlant notes, attempts at representing specific pain often generate instead a generalized sense of suffering, rather than the particular instance rooted in its temporal, spatial, and contextual specificities. Because these sentimental narratives rely on the “individual effects of mass violence,” the action taken is the pronouncement of a civically-minded empathy rather than radical structural transformation. These narratives result in a liberal sentimentality that binds people together through their shared capacity to recognize suffering and constructs an imagined community in which such capacity actually demarcates between those who give aid and those who receive it. Since service-learning participants are predominantly white, such participation becomes a marker of liberal whiteness in which doing this type of work and thus bearing witness to such suffering grants the individual access to a certain kind of (white) national identity.

While scholarship on sentimental rhetoric establishes the connection between suffering and emotions in the production of nationhood, it is important to analyze how, according to Ann Jurecic, these social emotions “can be expressions of power, appropriations of others’ experience, and falsely
oversimplified understandings of social and cultural relationships.”102 In his anthropological study, Marcel Mauss found that even the most “archaic” societies possess highly developed and symbolically elaborate markets for the exchange of economic goods and that this process of exchange between groups becomes part of a social totality in determining what is valued and valuable. Mauss proposes that the gift-exchange is the oldest known economic system and that a hierarchy is established through this exchange: “To give is to show one’s superiority, to show that one is something more and higher, that one is magister. To accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination, to become a client and subservient, to become minister.”103 Gift-exchange involves not only material value but emotional motives as well; in some cases, the value is entirely emotional. It is into this emotional circuit that empathy enters wherein one is empathizing with another. We often think of empathy as creating a space where individuals enter on equal footing, and, as Fordham’s language suggests, service-learning aspires to foster this image; in fact, that is where empathy’s perceived revolutionary potential appears to lie. Yet, in connecting back to the role of suffering, Ahmed explains, “the over-representation of the pain of others is significant in that it fixes the other as the one who ‘has’ pain, and who can overcome that pain only when the Western subject feels moved enough to give.”104 It is always the West that gives and “gives to others only insofar as it is

forgotten what the West has already taken in its very capacity to give it in the first place.” Thus, as Mauss and Ahmed articulate, things gain value through their circulation and within this market of exchange, hierarchies are constantly produced and reproduced.

For Saidiya Hartman, empathy is specifically situated within the economy of slavery because it renders racialized bodies into commodities and reifies the power dynamics of possessor and the possessed (mirroring Mauss’ magister/minister dyad). In “Innocent Amusements,” the first chapter of *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman examines the role of enjoyment in relation to the economy of slavery and the “figurative capacities of blackness.” Hartman articulates how the value of blackness resides in its “metaphorical aptitude, whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or understood as the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves.” In her analysis of affective scenes of spectacle, amusement, and pleasure, Hartman articulates how “the reenactment of subjection occurs by way of coerced agency, stimulated contentment, and the obliteration of the other through . . . an empathic identification in which one substitutes the self for the other.” According to Hartman, the foundational structure of empathy requires the projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other, a process that requires brutalized, abject bodies to remain dehumanized so as to

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108 Ibid.
maintain dominant relations. This projection necessarily presumes an emptied body that can be colonized, objectified, and possessed. Hartman is one of the few scholars who takes issue with the fundamental structure of empathy instead of its assumptions, significations, or consequences. Much like Berlant, she also roots her analysis in the history of slavery and abolition to demonstrate both its specific historical significance and its connections to the present. For my discussion of service-learning, I find Hartman’s conceptualization of empathy to be a critical reminder of how empathy is entangled with historical and contemporary subjugation and how its very form invokes the figurative displacement of the Other.

Hartman firmly situates empathy within histories of slavery, but it is also imbricated in discourses and practices of colonialism and transnational capitalism. Pedwell writes that “empathy has long been employed as an affective tool in the problematic construction of racialized and gendered social ‘difference.’” In her description of the colonial legacies of psychoanalysis, Ranjana Khanna states that empathetic discourses “could emerge only when Europe’s nations were entering modernity through their relationships with the colonies.” Though affect was a critical tool in the formation of colonial empires and the establishment of the transatlantic slave trade, there are aftereffects and legacies of colonialism, slavery, and empire that empathy cannot confront and undo. Empathy fabricates a discursive landscape in which only certain emotions

are allowed to be expressed for the sake of healing past wounds and fostering both interpersonal and transnational relations.

Yet, Pedwell argues, the “postcolonial ‘other’ does not want to be the object of empathy, but rather desires a place from which to voice anger, rage and bitterness that are not easily healed or redirected.” Pedwell theorizes that shame may be more productive than empathy: whereas empathy provides knowledge of others through the perspective of the “self,” shame forces the “self” to view itself from the perspective of the “other.” Shame is thus potentially an inversion of empathy and an emotion that needs further examination within the context of social justice, affective economies, and postcolonial discourses regarding the “other.” However, as Ahmed points out, even shame must be complicated and problematized for in expressing its shame, “the shameful white subject . . . ‘shows’ that it is not racist. The white subject that is shamed by its racism is hence also a white subject that is proud about its shame. The very claim to feel bad (about this or that) also involves a self-perception of ‘being good.’” In other words, whiteness is produced rather than undone through affect, particularly in the performance of guilt. Finally, the environment of service-learning programs emphasizes the importance of affective performance. The administrators, educators, and participants uphold a conceptualization of racism as an interpersonal hatred that subsequently needs to be “solved” through

111 Pedwell, Affective Relations, 104.
empathic intimacy, concealing the material consequences of institutional and structural oppression.114

Conclusion

In thinking back to the discussion of service-learning, it becomes clear that the understanding of empathy put forth by educational scholars and service-learning administrators hinders a critical interrogation of how emotions, like empathy, are socially constructed as solitary, what that means for their public expression, and how this construction fosters a liberal narrative of sentimentality in which one’s entry into societal belonging occurs through the compassionate recognition of another’s pain and suffering. Instead, scholars, educators, and administrators of service-learning programs deploy empathy as an idealized mechanism through which to radically transform oneself, initiate a desire for social change, and work towards the abolition of injustice and oppression. However, I have demonstrated in this chapter how empathy re-establishes the basic dynamic of the suffering other in need of empathy and the heroic individual who has the cultural sensitivity and compassion to offer up their empathy. As scholars of critical theory have shown, empathy has functioned historically, structurally, and affectively in ways that reinforce inequality and reinscribe difference. In the context of service-learning, affective and sentimental discourse can obscure the material and institutional structures of oppression. Perhaps more

importantly, as we will see below, this environment may lead to a critical perspective on institutional oppression, but likely prevents participants from recognizing their own complicity. As students reflect on their experience, they may criticize their university or broader forces of injustice, but they very rarely condemn the service-learning experience itself. Describing their experience as “life-changing” and “transformational,” students continue to see value in this programs because of its personal benefits. The development of empathy, embodied through interpersonal relationships, justifies the very existence of these programs, despite abundant scholarship that overwhelmingly reveals its inherently problematic nature and its connections to colonialism and slavery.
Almost every year, an editorial or article appears in Fordham's student-run newspaper, *The Fordham Ram*, criticizing Global Outreach and those who partake in the program. A few of these authors have participated in Global Outreach, but most are students offering critiques from outside rather than within. In “When Charity GO!es Wrong” published on April 10, 2019, Sean Franklin discusses the ethical problems of Fordham’s Global Outreach program, specifically complaining about being bombarded on campus by students’ efforts to fundraise for the costs of their trips. While Franklin does concede that the organization provides students with different learning and community-building opportunities, he disparagingly refers to it as an “enrichment program” that is “nothing more than glorified tourism.” The question of fundraising is Franklin’s most pressing grievance. He argues that because Global Outreach is not a charity, its participants should not be soliciting donations. He estimates what the average cost of a trip is per person and recommends several suggestions for where that money should be directed instead (e.g., donating to a non-profit organization). Recognizing that Fordham students have a desire to be involved in service work, Franklin proposes that rather than participating in Global Outreach,

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116 Ibid.
students should work for organizations on Fordham’s campus or in the surrounding neighborhood.

Only a few days later, a rebuttal to Franklin’s editorial was written by Eric Stolar, a student who was “involved in Global Outreach as a participant, leader and board member.” Stolar admits that Global Outreach “is not a perfect program” and agrees with Franklin that the organization should “keep their operations transparent and their work beneficial.” However, Stolar cautions Franklin on condemning the program without having personal experience with it. Primarily fact-checking Franklin’s article, Stolar says little of substance in response. He gives the impression of someone clearly annoyed by what he perceives as a personal attack. Instead of diligently countering Franklin’s critiques, Stolar continually emphasizes that Global Outreach is about learning.

The two editorials spawned a slew of social media interaction. As a Global Outreach alum, I had numerous friends and previous team members send the articles to me and I saw several people posting about them on Facebook and Twitter. Everyone was eager to share their opinions on the articles, their experiences with Global Outreach, and their reflections on service-learning. One anonymous comment on the original op-ed article in The Fordham Ram insistently affirmed Franklin’s position, stating that as a student “from a local[e] where GO! visits,” they “feel like a fish in a tank being observed by privileged

118 Ibid.
college students.” While there is no way to verify where this student is from, the comment speaks to the oft-neglected local residents living in the communities that Global Outreach teams travel to and articulates the ways in which the organization constructs an image of the ideal trip location through an assumption of the typical student participant. It is presumed that students would not already be part of the community visited on one of these trips; a lack of familiarity with a particular location is advertised as part of the appeal to draw participants. The student closes with: “[D]on’t ask your fellow students to donate to you ‘bearing witness.’” This idea of “bearing witness” is repeated constantly within Global Outreach rhetoric to emphasize their position of solidarity enacted through their mentality of “doing with and not for” others. Global Outreach’s focus is then predominantly about awareness and representation instead of action. While visibility is crucial, the idea of “bearing witness” in this context serves as an emotionally-satisfying justification for students’ participation in these programs. The anonymous comment is one of the few that wholeheartedly agrees with the author’s argument. The others take more of an ambivalent or nuanced approach.

One comment mentions that the issues presented by the editorial are often explored in the team setting and talked about among students and staff. Similar to the Global Outreach handbook, this approach appears to assume not only that these conversations are occurring across every situation but also that

120 Ibid.
they are in fact an effective means of approaching the structural inequalities and disparities at play. Others, like the one posted by Emily S., agree with the author that Global Outreach relies upon tone-deaf marketing efforts that do not fully represent what the organization supposedly values, but argue that, at its best, Global Outreach “permanently changes students’ worldviews by making them uncomfortable and challenging them to do better in their OWN communities.”\textsuperscript{122} Emily believes this radical transformation can be attributed to the fact that Global Outreach “is very different from the majority of college service projects” because its mandatory team meetings involve discussing the difference between charity and justice, assigning homework on the history, politics, and social dimensions of the place being visited, and reflecting on unconscious biases.\textsuperscript{123} She writes, “I think that for most students, GO! can be a really good gateway to community service in their own communities, \textit{if and only if} they are encouraged by their leaders to be uncomfortable with the fact that they are paying money to go on a service trip; learn and reflect enough to realize that their basic charity efforts won’t make a real difference if they’re not fighting the actual causes of injustice... and realize they are not special or altruistic for doing a GO! project.”\textsuperscript{124} Emily appears to recognize then that such radical personal growth can only potentially be achieved under specific conditions, but she nevertheless assumes that this dynamic is occurring across the entire organization and that it is an effective

\textsuperscript{122} Emily Sullivan, comment on “When Charity GO!es Wrong,” \textit{The Fordham Ram}, April 10, 2019, https://fordhamram.com/68450/opinion/when-charity-goes-wrong/, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
strategy. Additionally, though she does not mention empathy explicitly, Emily’s vision of radical growth echoes my discussion of empathy and affect in service-learning environments. How do we know this personal revelation has even occurred and if so, that it will lead to social action?

Hoping to start a dialogue on her personal Facebook page, former Global Outreach participant Hannah E. publicly shared Franklin’s article, imploring others to comment with their feelings and discuss the ethics in service programs.125 Subsequent comments reiterated some of the sentiments mentioned previously, while others raised new criticisms and new reflections on Global Outreach and service-learning programs generally. Kendall, for example, disagrees with the author that students’ Global Outreach fundraising would be better spent on non-profit organizations and reproaches Franklin for ignoring the intentionality of Global Outreach in trying to do the least amount of harm.126 Others, like Jenna, claim to “know for certain the volunteer/service component has an impact on the groups we assisted” and worry that articles such as the one written by Franklin will deter new individuals from becoming a part of Global Outreach. Megan writes that the criticism extended within the op-ed both misses the mark and is not critical enough. She raises the question of who from Fordham is even allowed to participate as a result of program costs. Similarly,

126 For the comments posted to Hannah’s status, I will only be providing the individual’s first name. Although the post is public, I see no need to share their personal details within the text of this essay. However, all of their comments and names are accessible through the link to Hannah’s Facebook status.
Connor also extends the critical analysis begun in the article. He agrees with Franklin for acknowledging how programs like Global Outreach “serve as colonizing arms for affluent institutions,” but says the author fails to analyze “how Fordham as an institution has a stake in maintaining Global Outreach’s current model. . . because it promotes a blend of Jesuit Christian values, American hegemony abroad and tepid reform movements domestically.” Connor’s comment offers one of the most advanced evaluations of Global Outreach, yet he still never appears to question the existence of the program itself. Instead, he advocates for strong leaders and chaperones who are willing to push a more radical political agenda.

Connor’s comment prompts a return to one of my initial queries posed at the beginning of this essay: why is the service-learning approach considered to be the most productive method for individuals to reflect on their power and privilege and then work for social change? Throughout my interactions and observations on social media, I noticed that critical analyses of Global Outreach were everywhere. Participants and non-participants alike recognized many of the issues I have articulated within this essay. Yet, no one seemed to question whether these programs should continue to exist. There appeared to be a fundamental acceptance that these programs, despite all their flaws, were still worthwhile endeavors. The most-liked comments on Hannah’s Facebook post represent precisely what I have been trying to articulate within this essay: the affective discourse of empathy within the service-learning environment provides an emotionally-satisfying justification for its existence, a justification that rests
upon the assumption that direct interaction with others is the most authentic, productive, and truthful method of working towards social justice.

Natalie, whose comment received the most likes (indicating perhaps that it spoke to what a large majority of readers were feeling), states that the personal and educational developments offered through service-learning programs are unparalleled. She emphatically states: “It is not shameful to partake in something that contributes to your personal growth.” Genevieve, who describes her experience with Global Outreach as “wonderful, incredible, [and] life-changing,” mirrors Natalie’s comment in her emphasis on the personal impact of service-learning. She writes, “Above all, GO asks us to reflect on the world we see around us—at home, and when we leave home and see places and lives and experiences that are different than our own. It asks us to learn, and grow, and be changed by it, and to take that learning into the rest of our lives.” Hannah, in response to those commenting on her Facebook post, believes that she “would be an entirely different person if [she] had not had that experience” and she fears that without it, she “would not care about justice or community or other people outside my own community.”

Natalie, Genevieve, and Hannah embody the objectives that educators promote through service-learning pedagogy. They have supposedly demonstrated an increase in empathy, a reflective attitude towards themselves and their privilege, a desire for social change, and a personal transformation. Even better, they have clearly developed a critical lens towards volunteering, charity, and service-learning. However, the affective discourse that I have sought
to describe within this essay traps students in a sphere of sentimentality where their desires for social change and the pleasure they derive from their service remains at the level of reflection and thought. In this repeated performance of a guilt-ridden student questioning if they should have participated in the first place, the conversation rarely turns to action. Furthermore, this dialogue is what happens among students who have “technically” achieved the learning outcomes of such programs. This says nothing of the students whose experiences affirm their stereotypes and fail to produce any sort of demonstrative personal revelation.

I mention this editorial, its rebuttal, and the ensuing textual interactions as a microcosmic representation of the dialogue students have on Fordham’s campus regarding Global Outreach. This paper has explored what significations the institutional discourse has imbued empathy with and how their programmatic materials deploy affective rhetoric. In some cases, the programs generate within them the very critiques I myself have developed within this paper. Yet, the conversations provoked by the editorials are illustrative of how students become imbricated in this discourse, how they construct meaning from their own service-learning experiences, and how those who develop criticisms of such programs manage to justify their existence and their own participation in them. Additionally, a brief look at these articles and their engagement reveals how many of the theoretical assumptions and issues I have outlined in this essay emerge even in relatively informal conversations between students.
Empathy is so discursively insidious within service-learning programs precisely because these initiatives are marketed towards liberal white individuals who are either unsure of how to foster social justice or unwilling to do the difficult work. These programs obtain a certain degree of clout for claiming to be radically transformative and grounded in progressive, potentially even subversive, ideals. They strategically shroud their mission statements and promotional materials in sentimental rhetoric so as to obscure their illogical underpinnings, as well as their more critical objectives. By producing a certain type of emotional response, students can be hindered from turning their critically reflective eye inward on themselves and the institution of which they are a part. When they do recognize their own privilege, there is a tendency to still not fully recognize one’s own complicity in participating. This becomes especially difficult to grapple with because of how the university markets programs like these as transformational experiences. Students may eventually criticize the program itself, but often fail to hold themselves accountable. The sentimental environment which relies upon empathy and direct interaction thwarts a full reckoning with how emotions dictate the relations, dynamics, and structures at play. However, as this paper has tried to show, the “investment in the affective potential of proximity and intimacy can elide the ways in which emotions are implicated in, and productive of, power.”\textsuperscript{127}

When empathy is articulated as the most productive anti-racist tool, it promotes a view of racism as an interpersonal hatred or prejudice, reaffirms Western

\textsuperscript{127} Pedwell, \textit{Affective Relations}, 72.
hierarchies of who gives and who receives, and obscures its entanglement with
the legacies of colonialism and slavery. Additionally, it fails to account for “those
so-called others who cannot be encountered or known as individuals, precisely
because structural relations of power enforce absolute distance or
segregation.” Furthermore, in envisioning an already gracious and welcoming
host, it proposes no solution for how one encounters subjects who resist
humanization through individualizing, who refuse to perform the script of grateful
victim. Therefore, the service-learning atmosphere precludes any examination of
how empathy is mobilized within its very environment and hinders discussions of
alternative methodologies for combating systematic and systemic forms of
oppression.

However, as I conclude this paper, I would be naive to argue that service-
learning programs should be effectively shut down. Our real lives are messy,
complicated, and convoluted and solutions are never that simply devised. I
began this essay with a short summary of my own involvement with programs
like these, extracurricular activities that ended up dominating my undergraduate
experience. I attribute much of my own coming-to-consciousness to the
introspection and dialogue these spaces provoked and I often wonder what
would have happened if I had opted out. The ends very rarely justify the means,
but how do we negotiate the ways in which people arrive at their political
identities and formulate their consciousness? How do we create better

128 Pedwell, Affective Relations, 33.
alternatives for this development to not only occur but to flourish? Fundamentally, I am questioning how we incite white people to deconstruct their privilege in an actually productive way so that, as the Jesuits would say, they might “go forth and set the world on fire.” Because I do not think these programs will be dismantled anytime soon, I believe that our primary work must be to question the positioning of these programs as the only authentic way to understand oppression, develop a "radical" consciousness, and work for social change.
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Aesthetics, and Sensible Judgments, moderated by Sarah-Jane Koulen.

Symposium conducted at the Synesthesia of Law Conference at Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, September 20, 2016.


