The unspeakable whiteness of volunteer tourism

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Tourism studies has been slow to think through the cultural politics of racism in the voluntourism encounter. In this research note, I argue that tourism scholars would benefit from engaging with critical race theory to better understand how voluntourism operates within a milieu of white supremacy (defined below). Critical race theory is generally understood as a lens for analyzing the systemic, structural features of societies which uphold a regime of everyday white supremacy and (differential) subordination for all those raced as non-white. Critical race scholars are committed to the broader ethos of “critical” research—understanding and changing the world (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Jamerson, 2016). However, critical race theory has generally analyzed situations within states; tourism studies is well-equipped to broaden critical race theory’s understanding of racist mobilities and beyond-the-state racisms (Weiner, 2012; Winant, 2006).

Rather than attempt to profile all of critical race theory in this note, I focus on the sub-theory of critical whiteness studies (CWS) which problematizes and critiques whiteness. This choice is guided by two observations. Firstly, not unrelated to the systemic bias and racism within the academy, there is simply a more robust literature on white-Western racialization than on racialization processes in many host communities (Ahmed, 2004; Bonnett, 2008). Secondly, the (limited) data on volunteers’ “race” suggests a majority of international volunteers are white (Lough & Carter-Black, 2015; Mostafanezhad, 2013, p. 488). Voluntourism may not formally exclude non-whites (Cheung Judge, 2017); however, the overrepresentation of whites indicates the effect of covert, everyday racism (just as the overrepresentation of women indicates a gendered effect). In what follows, I provide working definitions for “controversial” terms and then outline three areas from which this disciplinary dialogue may begin: (1) prior (quiet) racialization; (2) racialized reckonings; and (3) white ontological expansiveness.

Unlike in common parlance, CWS understands “white supremacy” to be “the operation of forces that saturate the everyday, mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of white people” (Gillborn, 2006, p. 320). Most white supremacy is not found at the so-called fringes of society, but rather is integral to the core of social ordering (Mills, 2007). Whiteness is “co-terminous with domination”—not a banal identity category; the history of whiteness is a history of violence (Leonardo, 2016, p. 4). Indeed, in CWS, “most white supremacists do not know that they are white supremacists” (Allen, 2001, p. 484)—though most white volunteers may not seem to harbor prejudiced views, they benefit from a structure of racism which dispossesses those racialized as non-white for the benefit of whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Tourism studies research often begins with the tourist’s arrival in a host community; for methodological reasons, the tourist’s lived experiences before the tour are rarely considered. This means (generally white) volunteers are discussed as abstract, typical individuals. CWS critiques this normalization. Instead, Bonilla-Silva would suggest, we should provincialize whites as a subset of the population with a “high degree of homogeneity” in racial ideology and a generally similar experience of quiet racialization which naturalizes domination (2014, p. 172). For example, one component of contemporary white thought is colorblind racism: an ideology which explains the outcomes of racism as caused by anything but racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Part of the allure of colorblind racism is derived from its flexibility and the “plausible” deniability it offers to whites. Tourism scholars can provide valuable insights into how dominant racist paradigms, like colorblindness, travel and adapt with the volunteers. Additionally, CWS would benefit from mobilities work on how transnational white solidarity is reinforced and intersected by nationality and class.

North American and European whites typically reside in hyper-segregated spaces of whiteness in which racism is easily ignored (Gillborn, 2006). The overtly racialized landscape of voluntourism, which vigorously reminds volunteers of their whiteness, is a stark
To theorize voluntourism as a racialized encounter, scholars need to consider its basic premise that a world out there exists and is available for certain people to enter and “improve” (Heron, 2007). A white sense of entitled expansiveness is not a recent development. The white Western colonist, as Edward Said noted, “believes it his human prerogative not only to manage the non-white world but also to own it, just because by definition ‘it’ is not quite as human as ‘we’ are” (Said, 1978/2003, p. 108). Philosopher Shannon Sullivan develops this idea writing, “[a]s ontologically expansive, white people consider all spaces as rightfully available for their inhabitation of them” (2006, p. 144 my emphasis). Tourism scholars, I argue, have another opportunity: this time, to explore how modern white expansiveness can be nuanced and re-theorized through ethnographic study of volunteer flows and any perceived barriers to white entry.

This note has called attention to the racialized character of voluntourism. Critical race theory does not preclude analyses of gender, class, or citizenship but it does demand that “race-first” analyses be done as well. Voluntourism serves as an entry point into writing a more global theory of racism that accounts for mobilities beyond-the-state. It is a rare semi-explicitly racialized encounter in an increasingly segregated world in which the socially constructed nature and the devastating material effects of race and racism are potentially on full display. This alone is not cause for hope, as racism has easily permeated before and whites remain in control of the voluntourism mode of production. Yet, it does provide us with a different set of questions situating voluntourism as a manifestation of contemporary whiteness, the study of which could be essential to furthering our understanding of modern globalized racisms.

Declarations of interest

None.

References