

DISCOURSES OF PRIVILEGE: A Discussion around Voluntourism & Travel Blogging by Breanna Riddick

MFS Student Explores Solidarity Through Service

Aug 31, 2016

When I signed up for the trip to Nicaragua as a high school student at Moorestown Friends School, I knew little about the country or ProNica. Through [prerequisite meetings](#)¹, the goal of ProNica was made clear: we were going to Nicaragua to learn about the culture and embark on a service learning journey.

The term service learning seemed vague to me. Upon arriving in Nicaragua, it became evident we were there not only to help, but to be helped. We visited different people and businesses and learned about their struggles and goals. We were in such a [destitute country but felt an overwhelming sense of positivity](#)³. People there were so optimistic and hopeful, and talked about what they did have, not what they didn't. It was inspiring, to say the least.



Moorestown student working on the foundation of the art school

I knew we were helping them, not only by [buying their products](#)⁴, but by giving them attention to let them know that their work was appreciated. However, I left each and every place and person feeling like they helped me as well. I learned that no matter how tough a situation can be, looking at it positively is always an option.

We also helped build a school for art and music. Sure, we were able to see our progress through each tree we knocked down and each post we painted, but the real reward came not from the physical results of our actions, but from the kindness we received from the students and staff. As we worked, I felt a sense of appreciation for the type of service we were doing. It was not just about getting the job done but about really appreciating the [impact](#)⁵.

The sense of urgency that I had previously associated with service work turned into a desire to understand the community I was in and what effect we were having on it. Yes, we built for those students and faculty the foundation of a school, a physical product of our work. But more than that, we gave them an opportunity. That building was an embodiment of the passion, dedication, and love those students shared for music. We were able to see our results not through the [cement fillings in the ground](#)⁷, but through the sounds of the music they were playing and the smiles on their faces. We were giving them an opportunity to do what they love, and they were extremely grateful for that. We left the school with a sense of accomplishment, not just in the materialized evidence of our work, but also in helping someone do something they love. Hearing those children sing and play their instruments solidified the fact that passion is just as important as knowledge.

I learned through this trip that just because someone is less fortunate than you does not mean they have less than you do. I discovered that there is always something to learn. I arrived in Nicaragua feeling as though I was going to help people and make their situation better, but I left feeling as though they helped me. [We gave them opportunity](#)⁸, but they gave us an appreciation for the little things in life. It was a two-way street, a mutual benefit: solidarity.

by a high school student a Moorestown Friends School, posted on <http://pronica.org/solidarity-through-service/>



Art class at Casa del Nino



Students growing in their engagement as global citizens

This poster is based on an analytical essay about pornotroping, the reduction of certain groups of people to mere flesh as objectified bodies, and the corresponding perception of black girls as lacking innocence. The author, currently an undergraduate student at George Washington University, reflects on her experiences during a service-learning trip with ProNica, a Quaker aid organisation. Here, two public blog posts about her trip by different authors are critiqued as examples of the prominent ‘white saviour’ narrative in international development.

¹The use of the plural, here, is typical hyperbole. We had *two* meetings. During the first, the teachers basically gathered us to tell us that they didn't have a lot of information. The second including a 45-minute crash course on US-Nicaragua relations. The only bits of ‘culture’ mentioned were warnings that as the country is more ‘conservative’ than the US, the girls shouldn't wear anything too revealing.

²The author, for obvious reasons, is neglecting to mention that the majority of the students were on their phones and/or whispering and laughing during this demonstration and explanation. It was incredibly rude and disruptive.

³In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Hortense Spillers writes “...1) the captive body becomes the source an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time - in stunning contradiction - the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor...”

We should always be skeptical of language such as this. It's a *fetishized intrigue that is both elitist and racist*.

⁴The idea that you can just throw (American) money around and magically solve issues in developing countries is incredibly naïve. Even if one buys into the neoliberal economic model of development, service-learning visitors provide revenue only through one-off purchases, and are thus an unreliable economic driver.

⁵We actually don't know the “impact” we had since *we left*. Beyond the fact that no one attempted to make any connections with the people we met, we all knew we wouldn't be returning. As this trip is no longer an option at my school, local communities aren't able to count on the institution as a reliable partner, nor can trip guides make observations about changes over time.

As a side note, please take note of all the *incredibly vague but positive language used throughout these posts. This is typical for voluntourism discourses - full of apparent promise, yet superficial with little actual substance or evidence of impact.*

⁷The author conveniently forgets to mention that she and our classmates needed to be told to move on to a different task after painting the same two steel beams for two hours!!!

⁸The entire tone of this piece is incredibly paternalistic. Looking at this more accurately, we did not ‘give’ these children anything. Yes, we ‘assisted’ in the construction of the new building - but honestly, guiding us in manual labor likely took more effort for the skilled workers than simply completing the project themselves. More to the point, those kids were playing music before and after we came.

To say “We gave them an opportunity” is to *place ourselves at the center of their issues. It is the exact opposite of ‘solidarity’*.

⁶At this point in the day, I got left behind on the way to San Ramón. After telling 2 of our 3 teachers and being told we'd be leaving in 10-15 minutes, I went to use the toilet. By the time I walked out of the stall, perhaps five minutes later, the entire building was empty. The group eventually came back for me, but I - a teenager on a school-sponsored trip - was left on my own in an area of ‘extreme poverty’ facing ‘desperate citizens’.

The only person to apologize to me for leaving me behind was our guide and translator. *One of the teachers essentially just laughed it off.*

I understand why such a story wouldn't end up in a blog post that the school, parents, and prospective students would be reading. But the indifference shown toward these people, their pottery, and my well-being makes for a noteworthy example of how “that order, with its human sequence written in blood, represents for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile” (Hortense Spillers).

¡Dia dos en Nicaragua!

March 27, 2016

We started today off with a plentiful breakfast filled with pancakes, fresh fruit and yogurt! After breakfast we started our journey to a new location three hours away. Along the way we made some meaningful stops and learned mucho information!



Our first stop of the day we went to a lake and took a boat tour viewing 365 islands! Along with the beautiful scenery of mountains and palm trees we saw monkeys and the houses of many famous Nicaraguan people.

After our boat tour we visited a [pottery school](#)² and learned about the culture behind pottery and how it's made. We learned about the three different types of pottery design including, geometric, pre-Colombian, natural designs, and

individual artisan designs. Each piece takes sixteen days to complete. The process includes: a two kilometer walk away from their studio and a barefoot dance on the clay so they can connect with Mother Nature — the people around the dancers play drums, flutes, and the xylophone. Next, they create the pottery using a wheel, and they let it sit for two days, then they polish the piece. Afterwards, they dip the piece in something that makes the pottery easier to polish, and then they polish it again. Then they paint the piece, followed by another polishing. After this they let the piece sit for eight days, and then they engrave the pottery to make the geometric shapes or to enhance the piece. Finally, they fire the pottery in an oven, which is very similar to a kiln, at a lower temperature for six hours and then raised to 900 degrees Celsius.

[After our trip to the pottery school](#)⁶ we started our three-hour journey to our next location in San Ramón. We stopped for gas and a homeless man stood next to the bus and begged for food and money. This was startling to us because it demonstrated the extreme poverty in the area and the desperation of some of the Nicaraguan citizens.



After we arrived at the hostel in San Ramón we explored a trail up to a lookout, and we saw an amazing view of the mountains. When we came back down the mountain, it was time for dinner and then a group reflection about overcoming obstacles. We played the “knot” game to teach

ourselves about the challenges of overcoming difficult situations and discussed the obstacles we've seen in Nicaragua. We ended the night with a short meeting for worship and a new perspective on obstacles in the lives of Nicaraguans and our own lives.

from <http://www.onlinemfs.org/nicaragua-sunday-march-27-in-pictures/>