

Sample chapter of:

Stanley P, 2017. *A Critical Auto/Ethnography of Learning Spanish: Intercultural Competence on the Gringo Trail?* Routledge: Abingdon & New York.

To buy the book and for more information, please see:

<https://www.routledge.com/A-Critical-Auto-Ethnography-of-Learning-Spanish-Intercultural-competence/Stanley/p/book/9781138898950>

Chapter 7: Voluntourism: Practicing on the community?

Volunteer tourism has been the subject of much critical debate in tourism and development studies (e.g. Lyons et al, 2012; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014; McGehee & Andereck, 2009; Palacios, 2010; Raymond & Hall, 2008). And its dominant discourses, discussed in Chapter 6, may permit tourists to reduce and disdain local cultures. However, this is not to say that all volunteer work is necessarily problematic. In some cases, it seems, volunteer work does help raise participants' awareness and shift perspectives in ways that can be said to contribute to their overall intercultural competence. However, where discourses of deficiency remain unchallenged, as in the excerpts cited in the previous chapter, intercultural competence likely suffers. I therefore ask: how do volunteer experiences contribute to making Spanish-language learners more, or less, interculturally competent?

It may seem perverse, but I am less concerned here about the effects of volunteer tourism and misguided 'helping' on *local* people. Yes, I think that far too many Latin Americans are catastrophically poor and that there is systematic inequity. But this is not a situation that can be remedied by a few crumbs from the *gringos'* table. Local people are also, for the most part, sufficiently savvy to be able to engage with visitors in ways that work for them, as the following stories attest:

Gringos came to the countryside and said, 'oh my god, they will *ruin* their backs weeding with those short handled hoes! Don't they *realise*?' So they went back to the USA and raised money for the poor, ignorant Guatemalans. And, proudly, they brought back their long-handled hoes, showed people how to use them, and handed them over. The local people were very happy. Lots of nice, smiley photos were taken. These were really good hoes with heads made from one single piece of reinforced steel. They were much better than the cheap, Chinese-made ones from the local *ferreteria*, which tended to break where the two pieces had been welded together. When the *gringos* left, the people cut the handles down to the length they were used to, because that's what they were used to and what they knew how to use. No-one thought anything much of it. The *gringos* just didn't know any better.

Another group tried something similar with stoves. An American organization thought that cooking over an open wood fire was backward and that, clearly, the people who did so were too poor to have any other option. And so in one village they bought everyone 'proper' gas *estufas*. But when they came back the next year, people were using them '*para poner cosas*', just to put things on. They weren't using them. Dismayed, the benefactors asked why not. '*Pues, no las necesitamos. Ya tenemos estufas*'. Well, we don't need them. We already have stoves'.

(Barbara, mid fifties, Spanish teacher, Guatemala, 'field notes', Xela, 2015)

Contesting voluntourism discourses

Many participants, particularly those who had travelled more extensively and/or those who were a little older, were critical of the discourses of 'helping' the 'poor' of Latin America, as described in the previous chapter. For some, this was down to personal experience of having volunteered naively in the past:

When I was in college, about [age] twenty, a bunch of friends started, without knowing very much about Haiti, started...a bamboo reforestation project. This was two years after the earthquake....One of the partners was a community centre that ran a kids' camp. I was like, 'I want to go help with the bamboo reforestation program, help with the kids' camp, and see what Haiti is like'. So I went for five weeks and I learned very quickly that [laughs] this very romanticized idea of volunteering to help the poor orphans is usually, I think, often the people who are volunteering may take away more than they are able to give. Not because they don't want to give but because...what is really needed is local infrastructure and capacity building....For example...they don't need engineers, they need someone to come teach engineering so that when [the volunteers] leave, which they all will pretty much [laughs], there'll be something sustainable left behind. I think people don't realise how little they can give....I think local kids enjoy it, but then it's sad because the foreigners leave and they create these bonds, which they then break.

(Nina, mid twenties, Connecticut, 'interview', Xela 2015)

Similarly, some of the Lima interns acknowledged that the student 'volunteers' that *El Proyecto* brings to Peru for a week at a time had a very reduced role in the eyes of the local staff and people, who may not see them as 'real people':

We go to the community meetings, we all have to say our names and say 'hi' to the community and have a small greeting. So there's just a sense of person-ability, I don't know if that's even a word [laughs]....Yeah, [the interns, as opposed to the volunteers] we're real people to them....Whereas the volunteer side of things, [they]'re there for such a short amount of time [a week]. You don't really get introduced to the community. You're just there....It's a white person in a *Proyecto* shirt....The volunteer trips are very, very coordinated....Everything is arranged for you [if you're a volunteer]. You don't have to think about anything. You just pay your money and you go.

(Nadia, early twenties, Minnesota, 'interview', Lima 2015)

Nadia's is a different organization to that through which Cathy and Susan went to Nicaragua, although the trip duration and the social media and other discourses of the volunteers appear to be very similar. In both cases, their usefulness is exaggerated, whereas to the organization they may be little more than a source of funding, perhaps for the 'real' work of an NGO behind the scenes:

Yeah I mean it's kind of like, it's kind of bad to say, but in the long run, it's basically a numbers game. Because that's how we sustain our NGO. We can help more [local] people by getting more [volunteer] people to go on the trips....So [the volunteers] are helping to fund-, so we can help all the future patients. [They enable us] to run our clinics. That's a very important thing. People [would-be volunteers?] always ask us, 'why is this so expensive?'...I'm just, like, 'think about it this way, half of your money is going to be able to do this clinic, you're doing all these things. How many people you help out as opposed to what you could have done with that money?'

(Saleem, early twenties, Georgia, 'interview', Lima 2015)

To Nadia and Saleem, therefore, the role of one-week student 'volunteers' is very important but less for any actual work they might do than for the funding they bring which allows the NGO to operate.

Similar funding models are in place at *La Torre* in Granada, where the Spanish school pays for the children's project, and at *Trama Textiles*, a weaving school in Xela. An Indigenous women's cooperative, *Trama Textiles* (its real name) provides an income for rural women whose weaving is also sold via the school and its online Etsy store. *Gringos* who can read and write English and who can use computers sometimes volunteer to help with the website. But for most, *Trama Textiles* is about learning:

Tuesday was my first time weaving but I really love it because I feel like, yeah, the balance goes where it should be. I'm the student and I feel I have so much to learn from these women. I feel like being this dynamic allows me to understand way more their reality, their lives, and doing something as we do, so I love it, yeah.

(Olivia, late teens, Quebec, Canada 'interview', Xela 2015)

The nature of Spanish-language students' involvement with local organizations—whether 'helping' or 'learning from' local people—seems to affect, and be affected by, the way they see their local role.

For example, during the week of Olivia's interview, where she and I were both taking back-strap loom classes, local workers were rebuilding part of the *Trama Textiles* roof. This sparked plenty of flirting between the young foreign students—all women—and the Guatemalan labourers. And it resulted in a conversation with one of the weaving teachers about the phenomenon of foreigners volunteering in construction projects in Xela. Referring to that conversation, Olivia critiques unskilled volunteer work:

I would feel bad to come in a country to volunteer, for example, to build a house. I have absolutely no competencies in building a house. Why should I, ...a student from Canada, why should I have the legitimacy to come to another country to show or teach or whatever something that I don't know about it? ...I think when the rains come the house will be terrible [laughs]. ...The people who do this have very, very good intentions and they're friendly and lovely. But I feel like this is really not the best way. If you want to help, yes, but do things that you actually can do. I feel like if you go to a developing country...you will be perceived that, 'yeah, he knows what he's talking about', and you don't.

(Olivia, late teens, Quebec, Canada 'interview', Xela 2015)

This does not mean, however, that Olivia decided not to volunteer. Throughout her Xela sojourn, she studied Spanish at *La Cooperativa*, undertook weaving lessons, and also volunteered at the local cultural centre. In this excerpt she reveals a good deal of critical reflection:

I'm volunteering at a cultural centre [teaching a children's choir]. ...I was a music teacher in Quebec. Also I was like, well, if a music school [in Quebec] accepted to pay me some money to do this, probably that is because I have the competence and I can bring something. So then it was like, 'okay, it's not only because I'm a westerner'I have a choice between, 'okay, well the centre [in Xela] can have a chorus [choir] or not have a chorus'I teach every week, for two months....We

should commit a longertime so that we don't just do something for two weeks and then leave.

(Olivia, late teens, Quebec, Canada 'interview', Xela 2015)

Olivia's text is considered and nuanced, and she is aware of how macro power relations affect the intercultural at person-to-person levels. Crucially, she also positions herself mainly as a *learner* (of Spanish and weaving), and volunteers in a role in which she is skilled and qualified.

Other participants were similarly reflective, some referencing reading they had done around these issues:

Before coming here I struggled with the whole, like, white-saviour complex and that was a big thing I was anxious about when volunteering. Because I'd read articles about why westerners go to volunteer in developing countries, and one specific article about a group of students building a house. They found out at the end of it, by accident, that every night the locals were undoing what they'd done and redoing it properly. So I guess it's a bit different with me because you can't undo what I'm doing [laughs]. I'm not building a house. I'm chilling with kids. So, yeah, that worried me a little bit the fact that I'd come here and feel as though I'm doing more harm than good. But now that I'm here and the kids seem to be enjoying having me there and the staff, I think, enjoy having me there. They've given me some mangoes and bananas [laughs]. So I feel like that's a good sign.

(Jill, UK, early twenties, 'interview', Masaya, 2015)

Later, in response to reading the draft of this book, Jill adds:

It is interesting to read back on [what I said] ...I remember not only talking with you about being anxious about making a negative rather than a positive difference due to the white-saviour complex but also feeling that throughout my stay. That was until my last day at the daycare centre when my coworkers asked for my email address to keep in contact, and many of the toddlers, upon realising I would not be back, gave me lots of cuddles and offered to give me their toys. I didn't make a difference to Masaya or a huge difference to these children's lives but I had enjoyed their company and they had enjoyed mine. I was there on hand as someone extra to play with, tie a shoelace or help them to eat, when usually there would only be one or two adults to 12 toddlers and two or three babies. Looking back, I would not volunteer in a country where I didn't speak the language again because I feel I could've made much more of my time and made more meaningful connections with the locals if I had done. However, it is difficult for travellers to realise this before booking a 'volunteer trip' as many companies state on their website that you don't need to speak the language to volunteer, as did the company which I volunteered through.

(Jill, UK, early twenties, 'Facebook message', 2016)

For others, the reflecting and thinking about the ethics and practices of volunteering were a collaborative effort within their peer group:

Poverty porn makes me really angry. It is so dangerous to simplify an entire country with complex issues and economic and social and political things going on to just 'poverty'. Because it contributes so much to that saviour complex, this white man's burden idea that like 'oh, we need to come and fix this entire country's issue

because obviously we just connect everyone to clean water and give them electricity. They'll be fixed, everything will be fine'. But people oversimplify so often and I think maybe it's just out of a good-hearted ignorance....That's something we all...sat down and really started talking about it in depth every day....There's so many things that contribute to this issue.

(Lisa, early twenties, Mississippi, 'interview', Lima 2015)

These quotes, then, show much more nuanced thinking about volunteering. However, Jill is a beginner-level user of Spanish, and the program for which Lisa interns places unskilled volunteers into situations of helping extremely poor communities, with no requirement that they be proficient in Spanish. Perhaps this does not matter much in practical terms: Jill works with toddlers and both projects are staffed and supervised by local staff. But although Jill and Lisa are evidently thinking much more critically than the sojourners cited above, a certain amount of blindness to their own positioning and usefulness remains. Jill does not ask, for instance, what the effect on the toddlers might be of repeatedly bonding with volunteers and having those bonds broken. And although Lisa (rightly, I think) rails against 'poverty porn', it is this very perception of the abject poverty of the communities in which she volunteers that brings her there in the first place.

Some participants took awareness and criticality further. The following quotes, taken together, tessellate to evidence some participants' nuanced awareness of power, sustainability, ethics, and cultural misreadings:

The clothing is really, in that particular setting, they're working at a domestic violence shelter with Indigenous women [in Xela, where Anna studied in 2013]...They're young women with tattoos and miniskirts and see-through shirts and lipstick on and facial piercings and all kinds of things that, in Latin culture, is not acceptable for women. Yes, they have their American rights and they have their American freedoms and they don't understand. That young girl [in the shelter] is looking at them as a role model....They don't realize how dangerous it is for them not to understand that language is more than what is spoken. Language is also communicated by body language, it's communicated by what we do and how we dress. This idea that, well as a woman in an enlightened society I have the right to wear what I want. Well no...That's United States culture but here in this culture, if you dress like that and you go outside at two o'clock in the morning with your girlfriends and you're hanging out with the local guys drinking, it may turn out bad.

(Anna, early forties, Oregon, 'interview', Granada 2014)

I think in principle...service learning is great, as long as it doesn't suggest that the person is there to transfer some sort of notion of the need for change. I think the best type of changes that come about are organically driven by local populations, not imposed on them by people coming [from outside]. So if service learning involves, you know, the typical thing here seems to be working on a farm somewhere....I've seen advertisements in English, like, 'you can discover the real Nicaragua by volunteering on a farm'....In a cultural context there is no such thing as authentic culture. It's, I think, a very simplistic didactic way to analyze the world....It supposes that Nicas have to be a certain way or they're not real, which is not very helpful. But on the other hand I see the point behind it. You have to market an idea somehow

and an easy way to do it is with language that appeals to a lot of people and say, 'come discover the real Nicaragua and feel good by working the fields'.

(Tony, mid forties, Massachusetts, 'interview', Granada 2014)

I talk to [students who are volunteering] and I see that they have good intentions and that even that a lot of the institutions they're working for as well have, like, really laudable goals, and people work hard to improve other people's lives. That's like an intention that I should respect. But just because they have good intentions doesn't mean that they...come without a lot of, like, weird assumptions...about their ability to help....I think that this is generally a problem at all levels of international development, where expertise is always seen as belonging to the West....And at the same time I think sometimes they maybe inadvertently do good things....But there's a kind of international development student internship abroad complex [by which I mean] most of these students who work here are relatively privileged even in their own countries. To be able to come abroad...and a lot of these kids are coming from fairly elite colleges too....One of the effects of that privilege is...the world is often just created for you and you just kind of step into it and it always works for you....This internship is just another one of those things that you can step right into and do a good deed and come out with a new line to put on your CV so you get into law school. And the thread tying all of it together is money.

(Kyle, late twenties, Canada, 'interview', Xela 2015)

[My experience with shadowing the midwife, mentioned in Chapter 5] made me question a lot of what really is the relationship going on between foreigners and locals here, especially when money is involved. I think it plays a huge part into the dynamic....I was paying [the local midwife] US\$150 a week to live with her, and that included my room, my board, all of my bus rides with her, and to follow her around and witness all the prenatal, postpartum, birth....I felt that because my beliefs differed from hers, such as she practiced early baby-mother separation, things that I don't feel comfortable with...I honestly think any midwife would have told me to go. That's not good for her practice. It's not good for me to be questioning her....I can't imagine she wasn't uncomfortable with that, but she didn't show it. And I felt that, because of how much money I was paying her, there was a lot of dishonesty going on. I understand that a midwife generally, in Guatemala, charges GTQ300 a birth, which is about US\$50...so midwives in Guatemala are generally fairly impoverished....She does several prenatal appointments, the whole birth, and eight postpartum appointments, for about US\$50. So to have an opportunity to make US\$150 a week is a lot for her, and it did feel to me that that was really clouding a pure relationship between us.

(Amanda, late twenties, California, 'interview', Xela 2015)

I was a bioethics minor at [my university]...so this is actually a really big struggle that I have. I don't have an answer but I can explain my struggle....So this trip for example. I paid \$1400 to be here for two months....What if I had just donated \$1400 to the hospital, what kind of resources could they have obtained? ...Lots of suture kits, absolutely, and medication. [Talks about the cost of previous volunteer trips, one of which cost \$1600]...if I had just donated that...think what \$1600 of medication

could have looked like, and it's a lot. It's pretty damning, to be honest, because it really makes me question why I want to go. So if I go in to try to provide medical care to these people, wouldn't it be better if I didn't go? I don't have any ability that would make me special, but these medications could save lives....At this point I guess how I rationalize it in my head is that these experiences will allow me to be a better physician. When I'm a more culturally competent...not only will I be able to treat my patients with a better foundation of maybe where they're coming from and not just white American western culture.

(Tina, early twenties, Virginia, 'interview', Masaya, 2015)

I read an article once that stuck with me because it said, 'young, blonde, white girls' and I just went, 'shit, that's me' [laughs]. That was the first line....It just talked about how, say, I come here and I make a relationship with some young kids and they look up to me and I give them things they need like school supplies and that kind of thing, they're still looking up to me. Where their idol shouldn't be me. It shouldn't be. It's that simple. So it easily makes them think, 'well I want to be like her and to be like her I can't look the way I do or I can't be the person I am'. That is something that is just not okay. But there is also...a lot of [US Americans] come down to do medical things...that have no idea what they're doing...it just seems completely unethical....I think when it comes to academic things [like helping with homework] where it's like, 'I actually am better at math than you are, I am going to help you'. It's not, 'oh well, I'm white and I come from a rich country and they gave me a needle so I'm going to inject you'. That's a big difference. But also, I think...they can look up to their peers. [At *La Torre*] the older kids help the younger kids, too.

(Sally, mid twenties, New Mexico, 'interview', Granada 2014)

These participants have travelled extensively and/or have lived and worked in countries other than their own previously. Crucially, all are making serious inroads into learning Spanish. And all seek to understand local cultures and to work out how they can engage locally in ways that are equitable, responsible, and useful. In these discourses, their 'helping' is framed within 'learning', both Spanish but also about local cultures, which they speak of in terms of complexity and respect rather than in reductive terms of poverty and helplessness.

Together, these participants discuss many of the tensions in volunteer tourism. These include symbolic interactionism, which Anna describes in the context of a domestic violence shelter in Xela. There is the problem of performed authenticity (MacCannell, 2008; Stephenson Shaffer, 2004) in which out-group imagined *latinidad* is invoked to market tourist volunteer experiences. Tony also queries some sojourners' desire, or assumption of the right, to try to change host cultures, an issue that Kyle raises, too. Importantly, Kyle links this to students' identities, noting that many are highly privileged. Amanda, Tina, and Sally extend this theme, considering the impacts of differences in wealth and skill levels in negotiating intercultural relationships and Tina's decision to volunteer rather than simply donate the cost of the trip. In particular, Sally refers to the ethics of volunteers doing 'medical things', and it is to this issue that I now turn.

Medical ethics and discourses of volunteering

While this book does not focus specifically on medical ethics, all the study participants including those volunteering in medical contexts were learning Spanish, and all sought to learn about and engage with Latin American cultures. So the following stories, although perhaps seemingly tangential to the question of intercultural competence development through Spanish-language learning, illustrate how discourses of 'helping' and dependence may interfere with an intercultural competence that is based on equality and mutual respect.

Participants at *Los Voluntarios* and *El Proyecto* were the most obviously 'medical' volunteer workers. However, they are at opposite ends of a spectrum in which medical volunteers may be more or less 'hands on', respectively, in the work they undertake. Whereas in Masaya the *Los Voluntarios* medical interns routinely conducted medical procedures for which they were not qualified in their home countries, such as suturing and injections, in Lima the *Proyecto* interns and volunteers focused on observing and non-medical tasks like helping children brush their teeth. In both contexts, most volunteers were 'pre-med' students or graduates in the USA, that is, students/graduates of the undergraduate degree that precedes medical school. No participants had *finished* medical school. As a result, many spoke of internships in terms of medical school applications, although again this is a very contested area:

Nadia: Many students that have come back from trips [with another organization], they've delivered a baby, helped in an amputation...

Saleem: Did surgeries, dentist stuff....There are two or three NGOs that do that. They're sort of our competition in [universities].

Nadia:...As a student coming to university for the first time, you are pre-health, pre-med, something, and you want something that's going to look good on your résumé. You're going to see five different booths at activities fair that allows you to volunteer abroad. So as a student, you're thinking, 'okay, I get to do all of these cool medical procedures and I can write it on my résumé, it's going to look awesome'. Little do they know...that med school frowns upon it, that you shouldn't be doing anything that you can't do in the US....It just gets me riled up when people come back and they're like, 'I performed a pap smear'. I'm like, 'are you authorized to do that?' ...It makes me so mad. Because I just feel like they're just losing respect for the human and human worth and [they're] just demeaning individuals. Just because you were born in a privileged place, in a privileged country doesn't mean you can throw up privilege on them and demean human life. But that's what it's like...I was talking to someone who was in the process of applying to medical school and he was like, 'you're going on an international volunteer trip for medicine?' I said, 'yeah, I'm really excited'. He was like, 'yeah, I helped deliver a baby my first day there. I literally landed and I went to the clinic and I did that. Then I performed a pap smear, too'. A man, an American male, doing that to...a Guatemalan woman. There's just so many different...lines that are crossed and a lack of understanding between those two parties.

(Nadia, early twenties, Minnesota and Saleem, early twenties, Georgia, 'interview', Lima 2015)

Nadia and Saleem are very clear that they feel they should not be undertaking medical tasks for which they are unqualified and, as Nadia says, doing so 'crosses so many lines' of ethics,

culture, and perhaps also gender. It is interesting that she claims medical schools 'frown upon' such activities, considering that she goes on to say that pre-med students may compete, on medical-school application forms and among each other, to undertake ever more serious medical procedures in developing-world crucibles of their own learning. And indeed, Tina who *had* undertaken several hands-on medical internships in various countries, described below, *was* accepted into medical school in late 2015.

My concern is not about medical schools, which is far from my field of expertise. More relevant to *this* study is how these experiences, and participants' narratives about them, affect their understandings of local people, and how these understandings go on to affect intercultural competence. The following quotes suggest the following two points. Firstly, that giving young non-medics free rein to conduct medical procedures necessarily constructs their patients as lesser. Indeed, when I asked Danny, the *Los Voluntarios* director if he would be happy to check himself or his mother into a clinic attended by his interns, he replied, simply, 'of course not'. Secondly, the very fact that the participants are allowed to undertake suturing and the like in Nicaragua necessarily lowers Nicaragua in their eyes. Akin to the apocryphal Groucho Marx comment, that he wouldn't want to be a member of a club that would have him as a member, for the participants there appears to be a sense in which, if *they* are allowed to practice unqualified, then Nicaragua can justifiably be constructed as 'sketchy', as Candace memorably puts it:

All the medics around the table [at *Los Voluntarios* 'family dinner'] describe the clinic/hospital as shocking, insufficient etc. Blood all over the floor, gloves/instruments reused between patients. Danny told me [earlier that day] about scissors so blunt that to cut suture thread you have to pull at the stitches a bit, and the wound sometimes then reopens. In this case, they got the scissors from the clinic, [and] sharpened them. [They also] bought the clinica suture kit with proper surgical scissors. [The clinic] had been using the folding scissors you get in a sewing kit. Later [over dinner], Candace says she wants to do skydiving in the USA when she gets home. Holly tells her, 'you can do it in San Juan del Sur [Nicaragua]'. 'No, no way. Nica is way too sketchy', Candace says. Nicaragua as 'sketchy' is based on her experiences at the clinic....Having come thinking she was helping a terribly poor country, so very poor that it needed *her* as a medic, has she now had this confirmed? Nicaragua is so very poor, so 'sketchy', that it cannot do anything 'properly', whether skydiving or suturing.

(Phiona, field notes, Masaya, 2015)

This theme recurs throughout the Masaya data:

The clinic was a lot different from what I thought it would be...maybe the standards are a bit lower....I guess they have their way of doing things and...it doesn't necessarily overlap with what I would learn to do [in the USA]. Because a lot of people here have diabetes and get really nasty infections....I'd never seen a diabetic infection up close. It's like, I don't know, people having amputations and...sometimes they just clean out the wound, but it's in a very gritty way. So someone would have a hole in their foot, and [the nurse would] dig their finger in and just scrape....There was this woman who has a really nasty open necrosis infection on the inside of her leg....We were just taking out the skin, cutting off some skin. And just, it smells like death in there.

(George, early twenties, New York, 'interview', Masaya, 2014)

I would say I've learned a lot, but I guess more culturally than medically...they don't have very many resources for the patients, for the clinic...it's kind of sad. When we do shots, they don't have an alcohol swab to disinfect it beforehand. ...In the beginning it was hard. I think they expected me to, like, know everything. They were telling me to do stuff and I just didn't know what to do because I'd never done it. But now it's, like, not that hard. It's pretty simple things. I've gotten to do stitches and remove stitches and stuff like that, which is pretty cool....They didn't really show me all that well, but I figured it out....The patients think I'm a doctor most of the time.

(Candace, late teens, Kentucky, 'interview', Masaya 2015)

Candace's sense that they expected her to know everything and that the patients thought she was a doctor reiterates the point made above, that Latin American social imaginaries may project expertise onto Westerners. This assumption leads George to recount that 'we' were 'cutting off some skin' while Candace says that 'we' do shots and stitches. Both have extracted their *own* hands-on experiences from this situation even as they distance themselves from the Nicaraguans running the clinic: 'they have their way of doing things' and 'they don't have very many resources'.

This is the dark side of what Kolb and Kolb (2010) call 'playspaces' and Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010, p.10) call 'identity play', defined as 'engagement in provisional but active trial of possible future selves'. While Candace, George, and others may try out possible future identities in Nicaraguan playspaces, the experience is likely far from playful for their patients, whose lives and whose dignity is at stake. Such experiences seem to do little to help sojourners build an intercultural competence based on respect. Instead of *learning from* Nicaraguans, Candace and George are *practising on* them.

But perhaps this kind of volunteer work *can be* useful, despite these problematic discourses. And some participants *had* learned relevant skills prior to coming to Nicaragua, whether through volunteer trips or otherwise:

When I was in Honduras [last year], and granted I was with other American students and we were with physicians who were from Honduras but spoke English to us but then spoke Spanish to the patients. [There] I did pap smears, I ran the triage centre, and I helped with consulting and pharmacy. I feel like I have the ability. I know how to suture, I know how to do these things....I also have been to Ghana twice to do a similar clinical [experiences] for the same program....Well actually suturing specifically I learned from my grandfather. He's a retired physician and I've showed interest in medicine for a long time and so he was able to get pigs' feet, which is like the classic learn-to-suture thing. So we had like a workshop [laughs] and it was just me and him and we sutured pig's feet for an afternoon. So I actually know how to suture....Every day [at the clinic in Masaya] we have at least two patients come in with severed fingers or a lacerated hand. The machetes are out of control. The safety with machetes is not a thing here.

(Tina, early twenties, Virginia, 'interview', Masaya, 2015)

Tina's account of learning to suture is touching, and her enthusiasm is infectious. But the fact remains that, in Honduras, Ghana, and now Nicaragua, she has been 'helping' beyond her credentials.

But while medical ethicists would doubtless throw up their hands in horror at well-meaning and perhaps reasonably skilled (although medically unqualified and sometimes insufficiently Spanish-language proficient) volunteers in Latin American clinics and hospitals, the brutal reality is that local provision may well be insufficient to meet local demand. Clearly, I would rather that skilled, qualified, local doctors were stitching up machete-wounded Nicaraguans. But if this is not available, is it not better that foreign volunteers stitch their wounds than that no-one does? *This* is the stark reality facing the ethicists. As Farmer (2005) says:

There have been few attempts to ground medical ethics in political economy, history, anthropology, sociology, and the other contextualizing disciplines (p.204).

And also:

The quandary ethics of the individual constitute most of the discussion of medical ethics....The countless people whose life course is shortened by unequal access to health care are not topics of discussion' (p.174).

This is not, then, a question of what would be 'best' for these individual patients. This is a case of their not getting to *be* patients if, for example, government corruption siphons money out of healthcare and into the hands of wealthy elites.

Indeed, it may well be Tina's suturing skills *are* plenty sufficient, compared to the alternatives. And there is no guarantee that a qualified doctor's sutures are proficient in the context, as this testimony suggests:

I went to a hospital with one of my dear friends who needed stitches, and...it was atrocious and it was a horrible job [by local, qualified medical staff]....It was not professional....I sat with her the whole entire time, from the very beginning to the very end of the [procedure]....I held her hand. I literally held her hand the whole entire time, and walked out with her. Judging from that, I don't know, [that doctor] certainly doesn't represent every doctor [in Nicaragua]....So I think someone can come and honestly have the intention to help.

(Tanya, early thirties, Oregon, 'interview', Granada, 2015)

Tina is also somewhat critical of local doctors, focusing here on their interaction with patients and their gentleness, or lack thereof:

I try to bring the same standard of patient care that I would in the States. But from what I've witnessed, physicians in the emergency room [here] ...can rough up a patient. Just kind of more rough and tumble, more so than I would have anticipated....So an example is when I was flushing out a patient's eye today. I don't know if you've ever had an eye injury but it's all you can think about, this poor guy. So it's flushing out, flushing out and the doctor just kept pushing his eye open really wide and wasn't being very tender with it....[Whereas, afterwards] I would do it for a while and then I'd let [the patient] take a break....So it's little nuances like that that I would assume that a physician in the States would exhibit and maybe not as much here....[Here] there's less of this babying of the patient, if you will. One doctor here, a guy came in and he's one of the guards around the hospital. He came in and he had really hurt his arm. I think he strained it or whatever. And he wanted an injection for the pain. The doctor came in and he said, you know, 'oh stop being a little girl'. He

called him a *niñita* [little girl] and slammed, like, just punched him right in his bad shoulder. That would never have happened in the States...You'd be sued.

(Tina, early twenties, Virginia, 'interview', Masaya, 2015)

In these two quotes, Tina and Tanya construct Nicaraguan doctors in ways that are entirely unflattering. Similarly, participants described witnessing doctors sexually harassing patients and nursing staff. Again, though, my concern is less for what this says about Nicaraguan healthcare, which is a separate study. My focus here is how such experiences, bundled with lingua-cultural Spanish immersion, affect students' development of intercultural competence. Unfortunately, if students focus their attention only on contexts of poverty and malpractice, reductive constructions of Latin American inadequacy are reified. While inadequate healthcare is, sadly, part of many local realities, if seen in isolation, without considering other areas in which Latin America is culturally rich, students may take away an entirely negative and unrepresentative picture.

There is also an ethical issue around the effects of these experiences on the students themselves. Tina also tells a harrowing story about a fatal accident in which an elderly woman, who was not wearing a helmet, 'fell off the back [of a motorbike, and] cracked her head open'. Tina describes the woman as 'not responsive. She was kind of gurgling but not able to respond to anyone's prompts'. Tina says:

In the States you'd go immediately to surgery. But here they didn't have the resources to do that...so they just stitched up her wound that was bleeding on the back of her head and just let her lay there for a while to see what happened.

The woman's condition deteriorated, and Tina recounts what happened next:

When they first tried to intubate her they didn't sedate her at all...But she was fighting it and there was just blood and vomit everywhere. They were short staffed....So they needed me in this situation and so I was literally, like, laid across her body trying to pin her down and her daughters were holding down her arms and legs. She fought this tube going down her throat and then was just like vomiting up all this blood and vomit. It was horrible. So then they finally decided to sedate her to give her the tube and that's when she didn't regain the ability to breathe again....What I kept thinking was, 'I hope that this is helping her because as we were doing this I felt like we were causing so much pain'.

(Tina, early twenties, Virginia, 'interview', Masaya, 2015)

Tina says that, as a result:

I just kept thinking if we were in the States this would be so different. That just kept running through my head that they would know what was going on. They would know what needed to be fixed...It was really hard. For me that was just a very clear illustration of the difference in medical practice....It was incredibly traumatic...in a, like, terrifying way but [also] in an eye-opening way. The thing is, when I look back on it, I'm not surprised that something like that would happen....People don't wear helmets [on motorbikes] all the time here. So I don't know if that's lack of education about helmets or if that's just the families don't have the money to buy helmets.

(Tina, early twenties, Virginia, 'interview', Masaya, 2015)

Reading this, and remembering Tina in our interview, I feel for Tina herself, who says she is 'scarred'. Although Tina is surrounded by fellow volunteers, there are no counselling facilities for sojourners in any of the contexts of this study. Tina is 22, far from home, mostly operating in a language in which she is not proficient. And she has experienced a traumatic

event. While Tina herself appears to be coping admirably, as I argued of young, Western English teachers in China (Stanley, 2013, p.187) there is often insufficient mental healthcare for young people interning or studying abroad. This is no exception.

These stories are very moving, sometimes shocking, and also hugely important in understanding how participants' volunteer experiences can contribute to their development of intercultural competence, or not, through a Spanish-language-learning sojourn in Latin America. Crucially, the participants' discourses of the failings of local healthcare and other systems, and the apparent need for semi-skilled volunteers feeds into a worldview in which Latin America is irreducibly 'other': impoverished, needy, desperate, unfair, unsafe, and in need of charity. This framing, unchallenged and reified by the experiences and recounts above, encourages sojourners to perceive contextual otherness rather than similarity, and to see themselves as 'above' local people.

But sadly they are not alone. Rather uncomfortably, I now turn my analytical gaze on my own work and sensemaking as a twenty-one year-old teacher of English in Lima. While I was not explicitly a volunteer, I earned much less in Peru, on a local salary, than I might have in the UK. With twenty years' hindsight, and a loud inward groan at my own naivety, I then apply twenty years' hindsight to my own sensemaking. This is not enjoyable, but it is necessary.

Foreign teacher (1995)

I quickly found two part time jobs: one in the mornings, one in the afternoons. The first was at an army officer training school on a military base reached by interminable bus rides. There, I pointlessly taught beginner English to large classes of smartly uniformed cadets. Many had been up all night doing guard duty and most fell asleep in class. They were very polite and hailed from all over Peru. Many brought me regional sweets from their mothers' kitchens after visits home. There were lúcumas, a fruit from the Andes, a kind of dark blue jam called mazamorra morada served with rice pudding to make the colours of the Alianza Lima team, and alfajores, a biscuit not unlike Scottish shortbread. Some students' eyes would become suspiciously shiny when they talked about their hometowns, their local foods, and their mothers. They were my age and, like me, were far from home. For almost all of them, I was the first real-life foreigner they had met, although many told me this only in hushed, confidential tones. They knew, and I knew, and I think also the Peruvian army knew that they would have no future use for English. But there was some funding flowing south from the USA to support the war on drugs in the Andes – I didn't mention my invented-bogeyman thesis – and these were the last days of the civil war against the Sendero Luminoso. So they learned English. Later, a few of these sweet military boys with their plastic boxes of sweet desserts and photos of their mothers were sent to the border skirmish with Ecuador. Fewer returned.

My other part-time job was at a language school where I mostly taught older teenagers headed for university. As I was the only gringa it was assumed that I would teach the conversation classes, and I still don't know if this is a compliment (only you can actually use the language) or an insult (you know nothing about grammar). Perhaps it is both. Certainly, both assertions were true. Conversation classes had no textbook and consisted of anything I wanted to teach. The end-of-course assessment was a curious mixture of each student giving

a short speech and a cassette-recorded listening comprehension test. When I questioned its rationale the academic director explained, in patronising tones, that as conversation is speaking and listening, the test should also be speaking—giving a speech—and listening—to a recorded text.

My four-week English-teaching certificate had not covered precisely why this is nonsense, but even then I felt that speechmaking and listening to recorded texts were quite different skills from those of having a conversation. And so, with the students' approval, we did the assessments on the first day before getting on with actual conversations in English. From learning Spanish, I was discovering that this sparked both language proficiency and confidence. The students seemed happy. Importantly, also, nobody questioned my gringa authority to shake up the way things were done. (I don't think I actually articulated this framing, even to myself, but my paradigm was clear through my actions. I thought that I knew better than they did even though I only had very minimal teacher training.)

There is something hilarious, to many, at the thought of a Scot as the model for Peruvians – or, indeed, anyone else— learning English. And, indeed, in twenty-odd years of working with people from all over the world, my accent has eased. It has mellowed, as have I. My hometown is now Nativespeakersville, Nowhereland. The last time I took a taxi in Edinburgh, the driver asked where I was from and refused to believe the true answer: 'here'.

But in 1995 I still carried Edinburgh in my voice. I thought that mine was 'correct' English and that Peruvian-accented English was necessarily wrong, uninformed, and in need of my correction. A minimal pairs exercise that I wrote for my conversation class exemplifies this. Along with the v/b pronunciation pair that troubles Spanish speakers –very and berry, vest and best– I included examples of the long and short 'i' vowels –sit and seat, live and leave. These also cause difficulty and Peruvians will tell you that they 'leave' in Lima. But in searching for examples for this exercise –nowhere I taught had any resources for teachers whatsoever– I came up with an example that only works in a (very) Scottish accent: bird ('birrrrrd') and beard ('beeerrrrd'). I cringe to write this description of it now. In most English varieties, I know now, these are quite different vowel sounds. Bird is /bɜːd/, and beard is /bɪəd/ (if you're southern English) or /bɪrd/ (if you're standard American). My version was /bɪrd/ versus /bi:rd/. Although it worked for the exercise, the distinction was misleading as a model to imitate because I was implying this was 'the' standard. Mine was a native English and therefore, in that context, it was the standard, not least as I was the only 'native teacher' in the school. My bird/beard exercise focused on reproductive accuracy because, implicitly, I wanted my students to sound like me. My minority, native-speaker accent was, to me, and crucially to them, a suitable correction to any Peruvian accented English. As non-natives, they were necessarily wrong. And I was right. There were many, many examples like that in my classes that year.

I thought that as the possessive 's' form had an apostrophe, that 'it's' must also be possessive, and I corrected accordingly. I knew that the present perfect takes 'have', and taught students 'I have an 'A' in my name' as an example of the form. I tried using jokes in my teaching that relied on complex word-play or obscure, British cultural references, and when students didn't get the joke I would laboriously try to explain, confusing all of us. I tried using songs but with no real sense of what to do with songs in class, I simply handed out the

words and had students sing along. I taught content that was far too easy or impossibly difficult, with no sense at all of what different proficiency levels need or know. And I had no real sense of why a given form was wrong, except how it 'sounded'. I was a disaster of a teacher.

Checking my privilege

I am aware, oh so aware, now, of the implicit, unexamined white-(wo)man's burden as I lived and breathed it in Lima. Peruvians and the English-language teaching industry told me that, as a native speaker, I was unquestionably valid as a teacher of English. And I believed them. To a very large extent, I accepted the privileges that my Britishness afforded me without reflecting on the 'helping' I was doing. I had laughed at *La Directora*, but just how different was I really? Danny, the director at *Los Voluntarios* describes native-English speakers as 'teachers' and as 'the ace in the pack' of volunteering, an unproblematic 'help'. But I disagree.

It is harmless enough for Peruvians to encounter regional accents or typical native-speaker errors. Learning English is about communicating internationally, after all, and learners should be exposed to different native and non-native varieties of English. They should strive to understand and be understood. But there is no reason for English-learners to acquire a distinctive native-speaker accent. Peruvians learning English should sound like bilingual Peruvians, and if they want to sound 'native', the variety of English they learn is up to them. It is not up to their 21-year-old 'teacher' who thinks she knows better. Similarly, although I was a native English speaker with four weeks' TESOL teacher training, I was unsupported in Lima and had no teaching materials at all. For all that CELTA is a reasonable introduction to English teaching, it is certainly not qualification enough to develop a curriculum from scratch.

I recently re-read, through splayed fingers, letters that I wrote home from that year. In them, I talk about the shocking poverty I saw –at one point, in Bolivia, I describe a rat, a dog, and a man scavenging from the same rubbish tip. In writing I soothe myself, claiming a bullshit martyr's identity: 'I'm doing something useful here....I'm getting involved with education'. Even then, I think, I had some inkling that 'educating' rich kids and military cadets was not going to change the world. What I was seeing was unfair. I wanted to help. I just didn't know how.

Among other things, what I lacked in Lima was a sense of who I am in relation to cultural 'others', and how to manage the privilege I might be accorded. Part of that is not rushing in fixing, changing, 'helping', telling, and correcting. Part of that is not believing—even if those around me do— that because I am a *gringa*, I must know best. I know some stuff. But, as with all of us, there is so very much more that I don't know.

In Lima, though, I genuinely thought I was 'helping' the helpless, child-like *pobrecitos* that were, implicitly, all Peruvians. I hear so many of my participants engaging in this talk now. It bothers me, but I ask myself: is it necessary to come *through* this to reach intercultural competence? Are we all on a journey here? I hope so. I cling to this to explain my own twenty-one-year-old letters and the memories of classes that I taught, which cause me to groan as I re-visit them.