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**The Voluntourism Encounter:
Affect, Discomfort, and Transformation in Yaxunah**

LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES HONORS THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

In Yaxunah, we were supposed to integrate into the community, but also stayed separate. We lived with families and slept in hammocks, but had very little interaction with said families, and slept in rooms with walls, a ceiling, and a floor while the families lived in thatched huts (for lack of a better word). We ate meals all together, instead of in the homes with families. We spoke English sometimes. We were served first, treated as guests, and we constantly being told about our itinerary, the trip as a weekend affair. While I did learn to sleep in a hammock and did do community service projects with members of the community instead of just for them, we couldn't really "integrate" into the community. We never can. The community of Yaxunah has a system in place, and receives volunteers all the time, making a good chunk of their economy based on voluntourists coming, moving dirt around and raking leaves, and leaving a few days later. We did volunteer work: I shoveled rocks and dirt around into new places and raked some leaves, others scrubbed walls and cleaned, but myself along with others felt our work really wasn't doing anything, and with some rain and wind, the place would be ready for the next week's group, who would do the same thing.

We felt we didn't make a memorable impact on the place we went to, so our expectation shouldn't have been as such. We did contribute to the economy: we participated in the dependency aspect of capitalism, voluntourism, and power structures based on class and race. We reinforced the idea that the place is one to be visited to quickly get a taste of the "other" and then quickly shuffle off in our van back to our comfortable lives in Mérida, and then in a short two months back to our even more comfortable lives in the US.

We did however get to learn in a very peripheral way a little bit about a rural Mayan community in the Yucatán. We did talk to kids and teenagers. We did both know who Iggy Azalea was and we did both go to school and have homework. We did hike up ruins together and poked each other with long pieces of grass so the other would think it's a bug and twitch and swat at it. We did make animal sounds so the others would jump. We did learn some words in Maya, some names of kids. We did play a game of soccer with kids. We were able to speak the same language. But we got to leave after 3 days of being hot, sore, and water-deprived while the community stays where it's at. (carolineinmexico.wordpress.com, March 16, 2015).

Halfway through my semester in Mérida, Mexico, my study abroad group of college students was brought in a van across an hour and a half of bumpy roads, into what we had been told would be our weekend of experiencing rural Yucatecan life. We would be immersed in a new environment, culture, and even language, as the community speaks Yucatec Maya. We were told our purpose was to volunteer, to both learn from and give back to this community that had

offered up their homes for the weekend, their time to spend doing projects with us, and their patience as we attempted to move through a weekend filled with mosquitoes, hammocks, stomach aches, and heat. I found we all experienced discomfort, whether physically in our new environment, or emotionally in our role as volunteers in this place. It is this discomfort and constant questioning of my own role and the role of the community that inspired me to begin this year-long research project. I explore here how voluntourism has become part of the community of Yaxunah, how tourists are brought to and experience the place, and how each group encounters the other. I am interested in how voluntourism allows one to explore and experience the world and its people by focusing on the specific case of the community-based tourism project of Yaxunah, Yucatán, México.

Volunteering in Yaxunah was an experience we as a study abroad group were told would introduce us to an “authentic” Maya village. Yet during our experience in the community, the other students and I felt discomfort and confusion regarding our role, our impact, and our purpose as volunteer tourists in Yaxunah. While we had some valuable conversations and interactions with community members, the entire weekend left us questioning why we went to this “Maya” village, what our role was as volunteers, and how our presence there affected the community. These questions inspired me to further explore the interactions, exchanges, and encounters involved in volunteer tourism. I will be doing so by placing the subject of my study in the encounter between tourists and hosts to examine how voluntourism allows these two groups to experience the world and its people.

I explore here how each side of the voluntourism encounter imagines the other, how each side sees their own role, why each side is participating in the exchange, what is being exchanged, how it is being communicated and received, and how the groups interact. In examining these

research questions involved in the encounter, I will also be locating my research in Yaxunah, Yucatán, the site of a small-scale, community-run voluntourism project, the Centro Comunitario Cultural. I chose Yaxunah as my research site based off of my connection with the community after participating in the voluntourism project last spring, and because it exists at the intersection between Maya cultural tourism and volunteer tourism that I seek to analyze. I explore voluntourism in Yaxunah through the lens of the political economy of voluntourism and its selling of affect and affective experiences as part of travel and encountering the Other through volunteer work. The encounter between tourist and host community is intertwined with a multitude of expectations regarding transformation, exposure, connection, and altruism, among others, that create an environment in which voluntourism's inability to create lasting change and deep relationships creates a sense of discomfort among voluntourists.

Despite the Yucatán's ample opportunities for voluntourism in both small- and large-scale projects, little research has been done for the field of tourism studies in this region. Mary Mostafanezhad (2014, 2015), Kevin Hannam (2014), and Stephen Wearing (2008) have published literature about volunteer tourism and theory surrounding the field, but there has not yet been a focus on the Yucatán region. The Yucatán region is of particular interest to me based on my background in Latin American Studies and my experience studying abroad in the Yucatán. In addition, studying the Yucatán allows me to examine the intersection between cultural tourism and volunteer tourism. The Yucatán Peninsula is popular for cultural tourism because of its advertised connection to a created "Maya past." This connection is a selling point for tourists interested in the "exotic" or "authentic" in their vacations. With Yaxunah's website advertising themselves as a "Maya village," their unique community-based voluntourism project

represents an intersection between cultural and volunteer tourism that I aim to explore throughout my field research and analysis (yaxunahcentrocultural.org).

Through this exploration into volunteer tourism, the encounter, exchange, I examine how voluntourism in Yaxunah creates affective and transformation experience for both volunteer tourists and the host community, but in unexpected ways. For volunteers, this affect from volunteering and living in Yaxunah does not take hold in a “feel good” emotion, it rather manifests in physical and emotional discomfort that transforms how volunteers envision themselves, the community of Yaxunah, and the voluntourism industry. For Yaxunah, voluntourism has been transformative in its transformation of the town as a whole over the past two decades. While individual contributions have not been very significant, the frequent presence of foreigners in the community has transformed the Yaxunah’s relationship to outsiders, its economy, and residents’ visions of identity and self. Thus, voluntourism in Yaxunah creates affect that allows tourists and Yaxunah residents to reimagine their relationship to others, to reflect on their expectations and motivations for volunteer tourism, and to transform their vision of the self and the community.

INTRODUCTION TO TOURISM

Amongst the wide array of activities included in the tourism industry, voluntourism emerges as a new and seemingly altruistic way to experience the world and its people. By the tourism industry, I refer to the companies, organizations, media, government-run projects, and corporations involved in advertising, transportation, writing, and selling voluntary travel experiences with an emphasis on adventure and recreation. Tourism is the largest industry in the world and through both formal and informal market economies, employs one out of every twelve

workers worldwide (Mostafanezhad 2014: 10). While there are many factors and elements involved in tourism, Lynn Meish (2009) defines tourism broadly as “voluntary, temporary travel for rest or recreation” (Meish 141). Johnston (2006) adds that tourism offers travelers “the ultimate break...where we can leapfrog into another lifestyle” (Johnston 114). Of my particular focus in tourism are tourists, those who are visiting a region, their hosts, those who work in the travel, food, hospitality, and museum sectors, and the series of political, economic, and social exchanges between those tourists and producers. Tourists can be broadly defined as anyone visiting another environment different from their own home environment by choice, temporarily, and for the purposes of recreation and self-fulfillment. In the Yucatán Peninsula specifically, the tourist is stereotypically imagined and positioned as white and Western, from the U.S. and wealthier European nations (Waterton 2013: 68). U.S. tourism in the Yucatán continues to be widely popular despite travel warnings in some regions of the country that were put into place in 2005 by the U.S. Department of State. For the purposes of my research, I will be examining the US upper-middle class tourist who visits the Yucatán, as this is the most common form of tourist in the community of my focus, Yaxunah.

Tourism as an industry is in the market of selling images, perceptions, and experiences of travelling to different parts of the globe. Intertwined with political, economic, and social relations between countries and people, tourism is one of the most popular forms of exchange in the world. By exchange, I refer to the process of encounter and entanglement enacted by immersion in a different geographic place and culture through travel. When speaking about interaction and exchange, I refer to the complex ways in which two disparate groups of people, host community and traveler in a volunteer tourism context, spend their time, share physical spaces, exchange currency, have conversations, and otherwise understand one another. These

interactions are intercultural, meaning they are in contact and in dialogue through an exchange of opinions, perspectives, and imaginaries (Medaric 2011: 297). Tourist and host interact, encounter one another, and exchange time, space, currency, and experience as representatives of their own cultures throughout the tourism experience. Exchange and encounter emerge when experiences and souvenirs are purchased and consumed, “questions are answered, historical landmarks are visited, food is prepared, beds are made, music is danced to, photographs are taken, and countless impressions are rendered” (Berger and Wood 2010: 2-3).

Upon further investigation into this exchange and consumption, tourism does not foster an even two-way exchange. Tourist consumes, and host community is consumed. Money travels from tourists to those working in the tourism industry, and tourists consume souvenirs, food, photographs, experiences, and emotion. Although one may consider this an exchange, it is important to note that currency is only flowing one way. Volunteer tourism attempts to create a more mutual exchange by advertising affective experiences in which tourists themselves can learn from their hosts, feel transformed, and gain from the communities they are “helping,” yet the exchange is complicated by the hierarchical structure in which voluntourism is positioned that keeps tourist as the giver and host community as the receiver of help or aid. Both sides are encountering one another, but one is doing the consuming of experiences, people, customs, food, and souvenirs, while the other is providing.

Encounter, as I elaborate upon further in subsequent sections, is the experience of sharing these interactions and exchanges. Encounter encompasses the thoughts, imaginaries, conversations, emotions, and perspectives that these groups communicate and internally experience when sharing physical spaces. The encounter in volunteer tourism between tourist and host community can involve emotional affect, discomfort, exposure, reflection, and

visualizations of the self and the Other. Tourism is about interaction with other places, but also with other people, in which currency, conversations, emotions, experiences, and knowledge serve as forms of consumption, encounter, and exchange.

Tourism is intertwined with social, economic, and political power as it relies on a hierarchy to maintain its structure of producers and consumers. This power hierarchy that favors U.S. tourists and consumers, those who are able to travel due to economic advantage and privilege, and keeps hosts and producers at the bottom, is embedded in these interactions involved in tourism (Barnett and Weiss 2008: 16). This hierarchy creates the circumstances upon which tourism in “developing nations,” often reliant on images of poverty, exoticness, and otherness, is based.

Tourism in “developing” or “third world” countries relies heavily on the marketing of culture, exoticism, and otherness. Despite efforts to connect the world and its people, tourism often creates the circumstances for further exotification, emphasis on “difference”, and stereotypes. By exotify, I refer to the process in which certain locations, people, foods, and cultures are portrayed as “exotic” through advertising or discourse based on their “difference” and thus intrigue among visitors. Cohen argues that in tourism, tourists are specifically inclined to explore difference, and thus are inclined towards experiencing the “exotic,” but through this process create images of the Other that can reduce a diverse array of people and practices to one essentialized image that emphasizes its difference (Cohen 1972:165). Creating exoticized perceptions of people and their cultures can be harmful when it reduces populations to certain characteristics, but also does work in bringing tourism to the area and increasing demand for consumption of this difference. In the Yucatán Peninsula, as I will elaborate further in chapter

two, the tourism industry is the market of selling an authentic Maya culture and people through cultural and volunteer tourism.

Cultural tourism in the Yucatán is based on representations of Maya culture, such as the very famous Chichen Itzá ruins site or the Maya calendar, among other images, histories, and narratives. Cultural tourism is defined as “tourism that promotes the consumption of a nation’s cultural heritage (e.g., cultural traditions, archeological sites, historical buildings, landscapes, etc.), by a domestic and foreign audience – and into an integral component of the nation-state’s tourism plan” (Bianet Castellanos 2010: xxviii). According to Kathleen Martín(2008) , for many international visitors, “Yucatán represents an authentic, distinct, Mexico strongly rooted in its ancient Maya past and a continuing indigenous present” (Martín 164). Among various forms of alternative tourism, cultural tourism is a primary draw for tourists to the Yucatán Peninsula, with its promises of a revival of a fabled Maya culture and history through ruins, traditions, ceremonies, food, and people (Johnston 2006: 113). Cultural tourism is characterized by tourists who want to find and consume an experience beyond beach resorts and spas, to see more of the authentic local culture. Authenticity refers to a created image of a distinct social and cultural characteristic of a people that the tourism industry employs to refer to sights as representations of “real,” authentic, or “true” cultures in a particular place. The imposition of a social convention that differentiates a specific historical moment as the “authentic, original, fully present phase of a society, building, art style, civilization, institution, or city” is an act of power the tourism industry enacts over people actually involved in these histories, cultures, and geographic locations (Castañeda 1996: 105). These authentic representations are based on a “constructed image that can only approximate an original that is absolutely not there, that is lost.” (Castañeda 1996: 104). Cultural tourism in the Yucatán sells a specific image of Maya people, cultural

heritage, and tradition through promotion of archeological sites, folklore, advertising, and souvenirs that further the created image of the authentic Maya as a civilization stuck in time and space at a particular era. Through the promotion of culture through tourism, the Yucatán Peninsula sells itself as a region of distinct, unique culture in which one can experience, consume, and even “help” the fantasized and authentic Maya.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis project takes place over the course of two semesters and one January term of field research. Inspiration for this project began in March 2015 when I visited Yaxunah for three days as part of a voluntourism weekend trip during my semester studying abroad in Mérida, Mexico. The trip allowed me to experience Yaxunah’s voluntourism project as a volunteer and to create contacts in the community in order to return the next year to conduct research. Under the direction of two faculty advisors, Professor Ben Fallaw and Professor Winifred Tate, I researched and wrote a literature review during the fall semester, conducted field research during January 2016, and wrote and completed the remainder of the thesis during the spring semester. This project culminated in a presentation at the Colby Liberal Arts Symposium in April 2016.

My scholarly literature review formulated a foundation for my knowledge of the Maya, the history of tourism in Mexico, cultural and volunteer tourism, and the encounter. During the month of January, I traveled to the Yucatán Peninsula to spend time in Mérida and Yaxunah. Yaxunah, located about twenty kilometers from the famous Chichen Itzá ruins site, is the site of the majority of my research. Throughout my time in Yaxunah, I conducted fifteen informal and formal interviews with directors, participants, and community members involved with the Centro Cultural Comunitario (CCC) about their role at the CCC, their goals for themselves and for

tourists, and how they envision and imagine the encounter between tourist and host community. In addition, I conducted eight interviews with US students who have volunteered in Yaxunah about their experience, lasting impressions, and interactions with the community. I conducted interviews with both community members and tourists because I am interested in how each side envisions their own role and the presence and role of the other.

In Yaxunah, I experienced life as a foreigner in the community, participated in the activities of the CCC, and interviewed community members. My personal participation in the voluntourism project was essential to my understanding of the intricacies of the encounter between tourist and host community, as I was able to experience the interaction first-hand. During my stay in Yaxunah both in March 2015 and January 2016, I was brought through the schedule of accommodations, activities, and meals as a volunteer in the community. By participating directly in the activities of the town and the CCC, I was able to interact with community members who are engaging in this encounter. I also examined the label of “Maya,” how both tourists and hosts conceptualize this word, its connotations, and its implications in the encounter.

I entered the field inquiring about how voluntourism provides a lens with which people volunteering and hosting experience themselves and the Other. Throughout my research, certain common linkages were illuminated, and I focused my research on affect, discomfort, and transformation as my time in Yaxunah and my time writing at Colby continued. I focus my last chapter on these forms of encounter between tourist and host community.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

In Chapter One, I explore concepts and context important to my exploration of voluntourism and tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula. I outline a recent history of tourism in Mexico and the Yucatán and describe the community of Yaxunah in detail to contextualize the community's unique encounter with voluntourism. In Chapter Two, I examine the voluntourism industry as it has risen in popularity in recent years, especially among youth in the U.S. going abroad. I explore the political economy of volunteer tourism as one that is in the market of selling affect, culture, and transformation.

The voluntourism industry is in the market of selling affective experiences that create emotion, reaction, and transformation. Affective experiences include immersion, exposure, movement, and, most evidently in the discourse surrounding voluntourism, “making a difference.” The voluntourism industry sells the idea that tourists can help others, give back, and contribute to a global humanity through their short-term, relatively comfortable and non-intensive volunteer work in rural, poor communities. I seek to explore this rhetoric in voluntourism discourse and problematize it by analyzing the power dynamics, structural inequalities, and limitations of voluntourism to create the lasting change and relationships volunteers may expect. I also explore how the voluntourism industry sells a particular image of “authentic” culture by creating and recreating Maya culture in the Yucatán to appeal to volunteers' desires or motivations of experiencing the Other by showing them people, places, and ways of life that they can then “help”.

By placing my research on the voluntourism industry within a framework of political economy and affect work, I examine the encounter as it is lived by short-term volunteers and community members in Yaxunah in Chapter Three. Chapter Three focuses on the experiences of

encounter between and amongst volunteers and community members I interviewed and spoke to during my fieldwork in Yaxunah in January 2016. In this chapter, I focus on how within voluntourism at the Centro Cultural Comunitario of Yaxunah, volunteers physically share space with community members, but feel an imagined sense of separation between the two groups that results in a sense of discomfort surrounding the encounter. For community members, the encounter with volunteers is a daily occurrence, one that is less about immersion and exposure and more about earning income for their families and continuing to live daily lives.

I conclude by contrasting the expectations created by the voluntourism industry in terms of affective experiences and culture with the discomfort experienced by volunteers to present how voluntourism allows for more people to experience the world in transformative ways and what this implies about our ability to learn about the self and others through volunteer tourism. Although this affect presents itself in unexpected ways as exemplified through the Yaxunah case, voluntourism still allows for the potential of transformation, questioning, and reimagining of the self, the Other, and the nature of the voluntourism industry.

CHAPTER ONE: YAXUNAH'S PLACE, HISTORY, AND PROJECT

A RECENT HISTORY OF TOURISM IN MEXICO AND THE YUCATÁN PENINSULA

In looking at the Yucatán Peninsula's tourism industry today and its promotion of "authentic" Maya relics, ruins, history and people, it is important to understand Mexico's history with tourism, its relation to the United States, one of the primary sending countries for tourists to Mexico, and how the Yucatán region has developed an expansive tourism industry due to both public and private funding and assistance. State-sponsored tourism development in the country began in the 1920s and 1930s as a project to further national identity, development, and modernization. For the Mexican government, tourism was part of a national cultural project intended to "unify a fractured nation and modernize the nation-state" (Bianet Castellanos 2010: xxvii). This project involved creating a national Mexican identity rooted in a specific image of a pre-Columbian and colonial past. Archeological sites, converted into "open-air museums of Mexico's past" (Bianet-Castellanos 2010: xxvii-xxviii), became markedly "Maya," or "Aztec," thus beginning the culture-based tourism that draws travelers hoping to find this authentic culture and history, filled with mystery, history, and tradition to the country.

Alongside this nationalist plan for tourism, the tourism industry in Mexico also hoped to gauge international interest in the country for both travel and political purposes. In the early twentieth century, the U.S. government encouraged citizens to "discover" Mexico, hoping that tourists would help build democratic ties. In addition, after World War II, the GI Bill paid for veterans' tuition at Mexican universities and colleges (Berger and Wood 2010: 8). These two initiatives raised interest for U.S. citizens and raised tourist traffic in Mexico significantly. By the late 1970s, the Mexican tourism industry was booming, and U.S. tourists accounted for nearly 90 percent of all industry trade (Berger and Wood 2010: 8). Yet, in the 1980s, Mexico

experienced an economic downturn, which the Mexican State attempted to reverse with the signing of the famous North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), effective on January 1, 1994 (Cypher 2011: 61). The agreement changed the entire economy of Mexico, transforming the formal market and inviting U.S.-based companies looking to invest in cheap labor abroad to the country. After NAFTA went into effect, the informal market, encompassing those who make wages without working for a formal business, such as street food sellers and souvenir stand owners, soared, and now accounts of 47 percent of all wage-earning workers in Mexico (Cypher 2011: 63-64). This growth in the informal economy was in part due to the growing number of tourists in the country, but also coincided with the drastic loss in employment and wages for agricultural workers, a majority of the population in rural areas including the Yucatán (Salvatore 2010: 35). Workers in the informal market can capitalize on tourist's willingness to consume the "authentic" local culture, food, and goods. Thus, the number of workers contributing to the travel and tourism region throughout the country increased, creating more opportunities for travelers to consume Mexico's history, culture, and environment.

Recent global concerns about security have dramatically transformed the tourism industry. In the past two decades, these concerns have created an imaginary of the "dangerous" and "unsafe" Mexico. I refer here to the 2005 U.S. Department of State's first implementation of a travel warning for Mexico. Tourism and travel post-September 11, 2011 created a culture of fear around air travel, certain ethnic groups, and global security (Bianchi 2007:68). While the United Nations World Tourism Organization and the Institute for Peace through Tourism continue to promote the view that tourism is a "force for peace and inter-cultural understanding," this culture of fear, alongside the U.S. Department of State warnings regarding travel to Mexico,

has created an imaginary, a shared perception, of a Mexico filled with drugs, danger, and violence.

More distant from the “dangerous” regions mentioned in the travel warning, the Yucatán Peninsula tourism industry has seen an increased awareness of security, but has continued to thrive as tourists flock to the region and its highly-developed resorts on the Caribbean side, and cultural and volunteer tourism opportunities more inland and towards the western Yucatán city of Mérida. While México City remains a hugely metropolitan area with cultural and archeological site tourism nearby, Southern México and the Yucatán Peninsula have primarily focused and relied on culture, indigeneity, “Maya-ness”, and archeological sites and have developed as destinations for nature- and culture-based tourism. For this reason, examining the specific case of tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula provides a closer look into how the industries of cultural and volunteer tourism took hold in the region and explains in more detail the historical and geographical contexts that allowed the Centro Comunitario Cultural in Yaxunah the opportunity to formulate and operate as a site for cultural and volunteer-based tourism.

In the Yucatán, development of the tourism industry began in the 1920s, when the Carnegie Institute of Washington, the state government of the Yucatán, and the federal government of Mexico signed a contract to develop the Chichen Itzá archeological site near Pisté (Castañeda 1996: 103-04). Because the Yucatán had access to more funding, connections, and resources, their tourism project and identity formed with a different speed and style than the rest of the country. The U.S.-based Carnegie Foundation’s funding of the excavation of Chichen Itzá in 1921 established U.S. ties in the region, and began a flow of hundreds of thousands of dollars to develop the region for tourism (Castañeda 1996: 103-104). The Yucatán region also developed separately due to their distinct emphasis on Maya uniqueness and their cultural capital as a

strong, authentic, and historic connection to a distinct Maya past. This cultural emphasis is very much evident today, as the tourism industry in the Yucatán sells Maya-ness as a primary element of the region's importance and significance.

The development of the Chichen Itzá archeological site, alongside development projects such as the creation of present-day Cancún beginning in the early 1970s, brought tourists to the Yucatán Peninsula for leisure, nature-based, and cultural tourism. As I explained in the introduction, cultural tourism is one of the primary forms of travel that draws tourists beyond the Caribbean coastal resorts and beaches in hopes of “discovering” people, culture, and something “authentic”. Tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula is fueled by “Maya culture” and the desire to experience Maya indigeneity, indigenous culture, and imagery. The presence of numerous archeological sites, colonial cities, and “typical” indigenous villages strengthens this emphasis on culture. As I explore further in Chapter Two, cultural tourism provides travelers with the opportunity to encounter the “Other,” the foreign, or the exotic. This desire for direct interaction with the Other combined with the desire to give back to the “greater good” provides the basis for volunteer tourism, and explains its close connection to cultural tourism. Cultural and volunteer tourism have emerged as prominent and influential tourism sectors in the Yucatán Peninsula, providing a constant stream of foreign travelers to its soil, in which rarely does a community have no contact with the global and foreign presence.

INTRODUCTION TO YAXUNAH: CONTEXT AND COMMUNITY

My research on the phenomenon of volunteer tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula focuses on the community of Yaxunah. Yaxunah is home to a cultural, environmental, and volunteer tourism project, the Centro Cultural Comunitario (CCC) that began operations in 2010 after

decades of less successful attempts to enter the tourism industry that dominates the region. Despite setbacks in previous projects and a wariness of the potential risks involved, Yaxunah community members created the CCC, which translates to the “Cultural Community Center,” as a place in which visitors, community members, and volunteers could learn about the community and its history, traditions, language, and values. It is through this project that I analyze volunteer tourism and how this form of travel allows people to encounter and interact with one another and a place. With facilities and projects to fit the desires and abilities of tourist or student groups that want to volunteer on a short-term basis, the CCC is an exceptional example of a voluntourism project in which the encounter takes a primary role in the experience. Volunteers work side-by-side with community members by staying in or near their homes, working with them on volunteer projects, and sharing meals together. Making the experience even more exceptional among voluntourism projects in the region, Yaxunah owns and operates the entire CCC with an emphasis on community benefit.

The small community of Yaxunah lies about twenty kilometers (twelve miles) southwest of Pisté, the town adjacent to the world-famous Chichen Itzá ruins site in central Yucatán.

Yaxunah is a community of about 150 families, or 700 people, of which almost all have lived their entire lives in the town. The town currently is home to a preschool, an elementary school, a middle school, and has access to transportation to the high school twenty minutes away in Yaxcabá. The majority of families are mostly self-sufficient, living on land that doubles as a home for turkeys, roosters, pigs, chickens, dogs, and even a few horses and sheep. Down the road from the entrance to the town lies dozens of acres of *maize* (corn), a primary staple food source in the community whose cultivation dates back to traditional Maya practices hundreds of years ago. Not every family has the same resources, but a sharing economy prevails as a primary

form of exchange and interaction, as almost all of the families are connected or related to others. It was common during my stay in the community to eat with multiple families, hear about how dozens of the kids in the community were cousins, and walk over to a neighbor's home to borrow some cilantro or a few oranges. To supplement the resources in the town, several trucks drive by every few days equipped with megaphones announcing the same message over and over: "tomatoes, bananas, carrots, vegetables, fruits, fresh and at the lowest price!" or "chicken, chicken here, get some now before it goes away!" Few families have refrigerators or the ability to store meat or certain ingredients for long periods of time, so families buy what they can eat, and share the remaining resources on days when the trucks seldom pass through. Four *tienditas*, little stores, dot the town's streets, selling Coca Cola products and snacks common to convenience stores such as crackers, chips, cookies, and breads.

The yards also are home to banana, starfruit, mandarin orange, sweet orange, achiote, and mango trees alongside cilantro, onion, carrot, and habanero pepper plants. Corn, the primary substance in the tortillas that are eaten with every meal, is harvested in the *milpa*, a traditional form of farming characteristic to Maya communities in Central America that emphasizes sharing of crop space and conservation of resources. Corn that is picked from the *milpa* a few miles down the road is brought back on bikes driven by men and women in the community, and brought to one of the three corn grinders in the town for grinding the corn into *maza*, which is used to make tortillas.

The streets form a 4 x 4 grid of paved and dirt surfaces, lined with traditional Maya dwellings and "Piso Firme" concrete single-room structures built by the government following the destruction of Hurricane Mitch. As a visitor in the community, I paid a family fifty-five pesos per night to stay in one of these concrete rooms, complete with hammock rings on the walls to fit

the only form of bedding in the community, the Yucatecan hammock. I brought along a hammock I had purchased in Mérida made of henequen to sleep in throughout the week, underneath a mosquito net. I stayed two blocks from the town center, which is home to the Palacio Municipal, the town hall, a statue of a Maya god and leader, a paved and fenced soccer/basketball field across the street from a church built by Spanish colonizers in 1817, a one-room health clinic, a corn grinder, and a brand-new playground area complete with monkey bars, a slide, swings, and two see-saws, which opened on the night of my arrival in the community this January. Diagonally across from the town center is Cenote Lol-Ha, a type of natural sinkhole characteristic to the Yucatán Peninsula that the town has fenced, cleared, and created entryways for in order to develop the site for the potential of both visitor and local use. Across the street from the cenote lies the CCC, which houses a museum, library, small computer center, meeting space, garden, and is the site of my research into cultural and volunteer tourism in the community.

In comparison to many other communities in the rural Yucatán, Yaxunah has a surprising number of young adults that stay in the community or return after they work or go to school in nearby cities. This is in part due to the number of local work opportunities that are available such as work at the local schools, in the local government, at the CCC, and in making the *artesanía* very characteristic to Latin America and the Yucatán. About ninety percent of adult men in the community make wood carvings of traditional Maya art, gods, or symbols, that are to be painted and sold in Pisté or Chichen Itzá. Two of the anthropologists most present in the community for the past twenty years, Eliás Alcocer Puerto and Grace Bascope, describe Yaxunah as a mostly self-sufficient farming community, with an extended reach into nearby cities as well. “Employment these days, although dominated by work in the *milpa*, which is primarily for

family consumption and use, sometimes extends beyond the community. If someone is looking for a higher salary, members of the family can work in areas such as artisanry work, masonry, or construction in the nearby cities of Mérida, Pisté, Valladolid, or Cancún” (Alcocer Puerto and Bascope 2010: 100). Although I could not physically see the migration out of the community, I heard stories of the many young adults and older siblings studying at nearby colleges ranging from one to four hours away, the fathers working in Cancún, Chichen Itzá, or Valladolid during the weekdays, and the families who have relatives working in Mérida. This migration follows a trend in the Yucatán Peninsula since Cancún’s creation into a tourism mecca beginning in the 1970s that has many men and women from rural communities migrating to cities in order to work in tourism.

In Yaxunah, community and Maya language and tradition are at the heart of much of the day-to-day life I was able to observe and learn about through my time in the village. The town describes itself as a “small indigenous Maya village” on their website (yaxunahcentrocultural.org), which doubles as a page in which to advertise the town’s tourism project, the CCC. According to the community’s website, “Ya’ax” translates to green and “nah” translates to house in Yucatec Maya, forming the two parts of the town’s name, Yaxunah (yaxunahcentrocultural.org). Community members describe the town as tranquil, a place that only connects with the outsiders on weekends and in the summer, but who is influenced by the presence of foreigners even when they are not physically staying in the village. Despite this influx of knowledge about and connection to visitors from outside of the community, many Yaxunah community members still take pride in their Maya heritage, traditional way of life, and language in a unique way that separates them from the typically imagined Maya imagery sold by the Yucatán tourism industry. While thirty seven percent of the Yucatán state population speaks

Yucatec Maya, all but a few children speak Maya in Yaxunah (Gaultier 2006: 17). The community self-describes as Maya and indigenous, and some families stated they only speak Spanish in the presence of foreigners. The community's pride in its Maya ancestry stems from its nearby archaeological site, continuance of traditions passed down over generations, language, and ability to celebrate their heritage through their community-owned and operated cultural museum.

Yaxunah has recently become even more connected with the nearby communities, cities, and rest of the world with the integration of computers with Internet access into the community. Unfortunately, the county ran out of resources to provide Internet access to the communities in the area in May 2015, and has hence cut off Yaxunah from internet access it had been using for upwards of two years. Yaxunah still benefits from an electricity project, a development project that brought pigs into the community a few years ago for farming, and a potable water project allowing for semi-running water. The presence of visitors in the community, which have brought Yaxunah's issues to a wider audience, have allowed for more opportunities for recognition of needs, desires, and possibilities in the community. Since the first long-term visitor presence in the town took place in the 1990s, Yaxunah community members were wary about how visitors and the tourism market would support their values of community benefit over individual gain. This desire to balance the opportunities and monetary gain available in tourism projects and the potential for consequences to the community and its values has characterized Yaxunah's slow entrance into the tourist market that began with the entrance of archeologists to the town's archeological site in the late 1980s.

YAXUNAH'S HISTORY WITH TOURISM

In order to understand Yaxunah's current tourism project, the CCC, and how the community participates in voluntourism, it is essential to understand Yaxunah's history with the presence of outsiders, whether they be foreign tourists, archeologists, or Mexican travelers. The first draw for visitors to the small and isolated community of Yaxunah in the 1980s was the archeological ruins site about one kilometer down the road from the town center. The Yaxuná ruins site, which bears the same name but slightly different spelling as the town, is only partially excavated, but plays an important role in unpacking Maya history in the region. David Freidel, one of the primary archeologists involved in the Yaxuná excavation in the 1980s, highlighted Yaxuná's importance as the westernmost site connected to the largest Maya inter-site roadway of one hundred kilometers (Freidel 1988: 1). The disparity in funding between Yaxuná and Chichen Itzá site is very apparent, as Chichen Itzá, a neighboring site, has been excavated, rebuilt, and converted into a tourist attraction and "wonder of the world" by the privately and publicly funded tourism project of Yucatán Peninsula. Yaxunah has not had access to these resources, but has still felt the presence of archeologists and visitors in a prominent way since the late 1990s. The founding of the CCC came after a decade of projects that failed to incorporate the entire community, and thus took away from the values in community benefit over individual gain that strongly characterize Yaxunah. The history of the town's connection to foreigners is crucial in understanding why the CCC of today operates as it does, and how positively the town's members view its contribution to the community.

A group of archeologists, sponsored by the Institute for Anthropology and History of Mexico (INAH) alongside a few other organizations and research institutions including Southern Methodist University and the University of Texas, worked on excavating the site in small groups

from 1986-1996 (Elias Interview: 1/23). David Freidel led much of this excavation process, which included regular meetings with Yaxunah community representatives to ensure communal decision-making and consent (Freidel 1988: 1). In 1997, after the unfortunate collapse and destruction of an ancient tomb that housed the body of an important Maya leader and figure, INAH took full control over the operation and continued work on the site until 2000. The destruction caused by the archeologists caused the community to resent the archeologists, blocking them from the site after the 1997 incident. Yaxunah community members exercised their agency in this situation, where they were able to unite to state their discontent with the foreigners in their town's archeological site. This moment was the first of several cases of encountering outsiders in the community in a negative manner, leaving the community wary of the influence and impacts of these groups to Yaxunah and its archeological site.

The archeological site of Yaxuná is unique among ruins sites in the region because of its haphazard-looking excavation process. As opposed to the uncovered and reconstructed Chichen Itzá ruins, much of the Yaxuná site is underneath mounds yet to be uncovered, overgrown since the 1980s and 1990s groups came through, or partially uncovered as to allow for walking paths through the site. There is no parking lot, tour guide system, or plaques of information throughout the site. Yet, on an informal tour of the site in March 2015 during my first visit to the community, we were led around the site by a man in the community who could identify some of the landmark structures, carvings, and the location of the destroyed tomb. Although this knowledge may not be written, online, or even in the archeological studies collected during the decades of excavation, this sort of knowledge has been passed down and shared throughout the community from those who worked with the archeologists in the 1990s. Although the community now has much more contact with foreigners and tourists, they are still hesitant to

allow another archeologist group to excavate the ruin site. Thus, the community's wariness to open up to foreigners again was very pronounced, and Yaxunah's entrance into the tourism industry is much more recent than some of the surrounding communities.

The entrance into the tourism industry for Yaxunah began with an eco-lodge project that did not equally benefit all members of the town, sparking a community-wide feud that plagued the town for several years. This project was led by foreigners interested in creating a sort of eco-lodge near the archeological ruins site. The organization, of which nobody in the town could remember the name, received funding to build six cabins near the site, secluded from the rest of Yaxunah. The eco-lodge site included a spa, the opportunity to visit the ruins, an artisan handicraft store, and, most notable and memorable for the community, a staff of fourteen community members, who received the only benefits from the eco-lodge site. According to Elias, the only way the rest of the town could communally make money off of visitors coming through the community was by charging entrance fees to the cenote. The obvious disparity between dividing fifteen pesos (about one U.S. dollar) per entry to the cenote between over one hundred families and dividing the money made from eco-lodge accommodations, spa visits, ruins tours, and store purchases between fourteen individuals caused a widespread riff in the community. Community members were upset that the project favored individual gain over community benefit, and did not agree with the practices taking place at the eco-lodge. Many felt uncomfortable with the tourist program, as they did not receive benefits and because the tourism project was not community-based. The entrance fees only benefitted the few members of the eco-lodge tourism committee (Alcocer Puerto and Bascopé 2010: 103). The town was divided over the issue of tourism, and did not allow the eco-lodge project to continue in the coming years. This, along with the archeologists' mistakes in 1997, meant Yaxunah community

members were once again disappointed by the actions and influences of outsiders. From 2004-2008, there was no tourist or visitor presence in the town outside of a few visits by anthropologists (Elias interview 1-23). The community's challenges with accommodating to an individualistic system strongly influenced their next move, trying to re-enter the tourism industry after a 2008 town vote, but through very different means.

The community's history of encounters with foreigners and the tourism industry informs how Yaxunah community members currently view their relationship with those outside the community. It was clear the past approaches to creating a sort of community program to allow for visitors to experience Yaxunah were fracturing community unity rather than promoting it. Thus, community encounters with visitors were becoming associated with unequal distribution of funds and resources. In looking towards creating another community project, leaders in the community established a committee of rotating leadership that represented community members from twelve different sections of the town and vowed to work towards establishing a project that would allow for visitors to enter the community, but would primarily serve to benefit and reunite the community.

CENTRO CULTURAL COMUNITARIO – BEGINNINGS

Thus began the process of creating the Centro Cultural Comunitario (CCC), the focus of my research in encounters between and among people from different places within voluntourism. Numerous town members were upset about the divide in the community following Yaxunah's first attempt at integrating into the tourist market through their eco-lodge. These community members, wary of the consequences a new project could bring, include Jorge Tomás¹, who decided to headline the committee that eventually formulated the idea for the CCC after many

debates, conversations, town meetings, and appeals to outside organizations for funding. Jorge Tomás described his involvement with the project, “well, the problem with the last project was that when thinking about tourism, one does not think about the community. Now, we would like to find a way to attract tourists, mainly foreigners, while also bringing benefits to the community” (Jorge Tomás Interview: 1/18)ⁱⁱ. Community members worked with this idea, to reach out to the massive number of tourists and visitors that come through the area, in their founding of the CCC. In order to avoid the unequal distribution of benefits in the last tourism project, community members emphasized the need for a more community-based approach.

In the end of 2009 and beginning of 2010, an organization connected to the Maya Research Programme, the current source of funding for the CCC, brought in a group to teach the town in methods of interacting with, cooking for, hosting, and speaking to tourists and visitors to prepare them for work with the CCC. Primarily, the teaching sessions were focused on interacting with visitors and different types of tourists, whether they be families from the nearby city of Mérida, who spoke fluent Spanish and were familiar with the environment, to students from the United States, who would speak much less Spanish and be less familiar with the food, lifestyle, and culture of Yaxunah. “We were young. Yes we had ideas, but we did not know how to make those ideas happen or how to find opportunities or resources and all of that. So, little by little we began learning... and we started to incorporate groups already established in the community” (Jorge Tomás Interview: 1/18). At the end of the months of lessons, a committee chose the group of thirty that would end up working at the CCC moving forward towards its opening (Jorge Tomás Interview: 1/18).

I was initially surprised by the concept of being trained in encountering foreigners, but remembered my own training session had occurred a week before my first trip to Yaxunah in

March 2015. As I had been taught about eating everything you're given, always applying ample sunscreen and bug spray, and sleeping diagonally in a hammock, Yaxunah community members were learning the tools to accommodate for foreign visitors, such as cooking food for vegetarians, how to prepare a space for a visitor to stay, and how to effectively manage their community center. This process entailed the community taking charge of their own tourism project, working with each other as co-leaders and community members, and being able to welcome visitors to the community.

This self-run tourism project, among rural communities involved in tourism, is quite unique. Having full jurisdiction over the activities, goals, and allocation of funds allows for the community to have more agency and control over on how the CCC operates and continues to grow. The community-based structure of the CCC has a rotating leadership system, benefit for all community members, and opportunities for youth and adults to get more involved in the community. Yaxunah community members with whom I spoke described the CCC as a place that serves the community first, and visitors, volunteers, or tourists as an added source of income. Many of the ways in which community members described their encounters with foreigners and outsiders at the CCC stem from this sentiment of community priority. With the community at the forefront of its goals, the CCC presents an approach to volunteer tourism in which voluntourists can expect to interact directly with the community, and in which there is expectation and promise of the sort of "ethical" tourism that the voluntourism industry promotes. Yet, as my research into voluntourism encounters demonstrates, this expectation for visitors is not met with reality, and thus affects volunteer tourists with a sense of discomfort stemming from the encounter with another place, people, and situation in which the promises and imaginaries of cultural and volunteer tourism do not hold true.

CENTRO COMUNITARIO CULTURAL – PLACE

At the CCC on a Thursday afternoon, the town is just beginning to buzz with activity from the students leaving from their long days at the primary and secondary schools in town. As the town is a mere 10 blocks in total, everything can be heard throughout the town, including the sound of birds chirping, pigs grunting, street dogs barking, and men chopping slowly away at wood to be carved into masks and sold at Chichen Itzá or in Pisté. A nearby house loudly plays the sounds of Norteña music, which to me sounds like the same song over and over, with a strong brass section and a bellowing male lead voice. Children have more recently begun to spend their time afterschool in the newly-built playground in the town center, but Maria tells me that on weekends and vacations from school, the CCC is filled with children. She tells me that the CCC is a safe space for the kids to play games, use the art supplies, or help out with the maintenance of the site. From the CCC, I can see the fence around the cenote area, the town center, the Palacio Municipal, and the newly-built Parador Turístico, whose founders hope to bring more visitors to the area by opening up a restaurant. I sit on the steps on the CCC, planning an activity period I will hold on Sunday for children incorporating Maya, Spanish, and English with coloring and writing. Two young girls in second grade are also at the CCC, and are eager to talk to me and help me out with my preparations. As I continue looking at my materials, Maria and Fernando sit by my side on the steps. They watch over the CCC's daily activities, and enjoy spending time at the place, as they monitor its opening and closing every day. With the sound of birds chirping and the pink and blue sky fading as the sun slowly sets, the Yucatecan winter chill begins to set in. I continue to chat with Maria about the CCC, her involvement with the center, and how much she enjoys her time here. She is adamant about keeping the culture alive, and believes that other towns may be losing their culture. According to Maria, Yaxunah has not lost their traditions, language, or celebrations, but has rather strengthened them by having a place where culture is valued and can be celebrated. (fieldnotes 1/14/16)

The CCC represents a unique case among tourism projects in the Yucatán Peninsula because of its emphasis on cultural sustainability and community benefit and priority. Tourism projects are common nowadays in rural Yucatán communities, but there are often issues with sustainability, agency of community members, and the re-creation of identity or local traditions to the specific desires of the tourists passing through. The CCC prides itself in its self-definition of Maya identity, one shared by many members of the community, as a culture, community, and

way of life that connects Yaxunah's present to its past heritage of Maya pre-Hispanic civilizations and language.

Before the founding of the CCC, there was no established regional structure in which the community could be directly involved and benefit from the economic activity generated from tourism, causing much disappointment in the rural Yucatán. For this very reason, the community members of Yaxunah were very wary of creating a tourism project. Tourism projects are often started, funded, and maintained by outside companies, which have town members working for them, but are not owned and maintained by the town (Alcocer Puerto and Bascopé 2010: 95). In response to this trend, which Yaxunah had just recently encountered with their prior failed tourism project, the community sought to create a space that prioritized the community's needs and desires first, with tourism as an added bonus. Jorge Tomás affirmed this priority: "the primary purpose is culture, tourism is additional. Why? We ask for a small entrance fee that reinforces what we already have to offer. From this, everything at the CCC can continue. Primarily, we focus on community" (Jorge Tomás Interview: 1/18).

The CCC, first opened in 2010, consists of a large building that encompasses the Museo de Cultura "cultural museum" and the room that functions as both a small library and a computer center. The Museo de Cultura is the centerpiece of the CCC and was the initial idea behind the site back when a tourism project was an item of debate in town meetings and among the Consejo Comunitario, a committee that formed to make sure the CCC project ran smoothly. The Consejo Comunitario distributes power in a way that represents how the community envisions the CCC as a community-run and community-beneficial space. Leadership rotates from one leader to the next in a cycle, sharing equal time as a leader but also ensuring that all voices are heard (Jorge Tomás Interview: 1/18). Inside this museum lies rocks, bones, and artifacts from the Yaxuná

ruins site down the road, information in English and Spanish about the artifacts, exhibits on Maya traditions including *milpa* and *cuch*, a pig roasting ceremony, a recycled art exhibit, and a three-dimensional map diorama of the community. Every visitor who comes through the CCC is led through the museum, described by many as the central element to the entire project (Elias 1/23).

Across a walkway from the museum is the library and computer center. Because of the county-wide internet outage, the computers remain mostly unused except for a few that are usually occupied by teenagers eager to watch a film that one of their friends or family members was able to access. The library is organized by genre and has about one hundred books ranging from bilingual dictionaries to archeological research published on the Yucatán. Also in the room is a calendar, a telephone that does not have service, two overhead fans, and metal cabinets that house arts and crafts supplies. Alongside the outside wall of the library and computer center is a hand-painted mural that seeks to encompass the beauty of the Yucatán Maya environment and the importance of corn, animals, and agriculture to the Maya people. Down a paved sidewalk and ramp to the right of the museum and library building is a small building home to two bathrooms with running water adjacent to a storage building built in late 2015.

The site is also home to a large medicinal plant garden, a statuesque tree surrounded by smaller plants and pebbled pathways, and a traditional thatched-roof *palapa* dwelling for events, meetings, and performances. The CCC's beauty as a site is due to the commitment of the volunteers from Yaxunah itself to maintain the cleanliness, safety, and upkeep of the space. The CCC hosts celebrations for the town, activities for children, and is visited by tourists, volunteer groups, and students. As I was able to observe during my time in Yaxunah during the off-season for visitors and travelers, the CCC is not only in place as a tourism project, though it does work

to ensure that certain visitors do find Yaxunah and spend time learning about the place, its culture, and its people. The Yaxunah CCC was recently included in the Atlas for Alternative Tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula as a site for rural and ethnic tourism. The atlas also describes the CCC as a place for “community tourism”, offering classes and experiences in artisan handicrafts, traditional medicines and plants, local foods, and Maya languages and ceremonies (Garcia de Fuentes and Jouault 2015: Tabla 17).

According to Elias, the primary contact for visitors interested in spending time in Yaxunah either as volunteers or for a day trip, “Yaxunah is not for the kind of tourist who is just passing through and looking for a more luxury experience, Yaxunah is the type of place a certain type of tourist will find if they want to learn more about culture and get a different kind of experience” (Elias Interview: 1/23). Visitors, whether they consider themselves travelers or volunteers, can take advantage of the mostly environmentally-based activities offered at the CCC. The center asks for a small entrance fee to swim in the cenote, see the museum, and learn about the garden, plants, and history of Yaxunah. One Saturday during my stay in the community, a group of tourists were led through the site in a fairly calculated manner; they saw the museum, wore lifejackets that said “Yaxunah: Cenote Lol-Ha” while they swam in the cenote, and took photos of a local high school student playing the drums underneath the large *ceiba* tree and of the mural of the Yucatecan flora and fauna. The tourists were provided with an experience to learn about a new place and different way of life than their own, but after two hours quickly packed up their backpacks and headed to their next destination. Rarely do CCC day visitors venture into the rest of the town or make an effort to get to know the people of Yaxunah. Despite the small number of day visitors and the lack of volunteer groups during some months, Yaxunah’s CCC is able to remain open and for community use throughout the year. This

is primarily due to the site's community-based and community-beneficial structure that places the most importance on collective participation, consent, and prosperity.

The CCC is a community-run initiative to both celebrate the culture of Yaxunah and allow visitors to learn about the town's culture, people, and environment. What sets the project apart from the others in the region is the focus on a community-wide benefit and an ownership over the activities at the space.

As it is the Cultural Community Center, we do not want it to convert into something private. In that case, members of the community could not enter and use the space. It is for that reason that we hold all the events at the CCC. The philosophy of the CCC is to invite the local community. First, the local community, and second, any visitors. The way we sustain this is by not charging any community members for using the CCC, but still charging visitors... The CCC was founded for the local youth, but not only for them, it's for everyone. But, one of the other philosophies of the CCC is to inspire the youth to help out their community. In forming this system, we can help create a perspective on life for them (Elias Interview 1/23).

Yaxunah community members on the CCC committee decide on new projects for the space, while all who live in the town are able to access its clean and safe spaces for events, celebrations, or meetings. The focus on culture and cultural pride in the museum of the CCC also allows it to serve as a centerpiece of Maya cultural representation that differs from that which is represented at many of the larger tourism projects, such as the archeological site of Chichen Itzá. The ways in which members of the Yaxunah community interact with the tourism industry are based off of this creation and re-creation of power as a community-based endeavor. As I further examine the voluntourism industry and its role in Yaxunah, I seek to focus on how Yaxunah's CCC allows the community to interact with volunteer tourists, and how it facilitates both a connection and separation between the two groups.

CHAPTER TWO: VOLUNTOURISM AND ITS ROLE IN YAXUNAH

Within the larger field of tourism, the niche market of volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, has emerged as an industry interested in selling experiences, representations of culture, opportunities for self-transformation, and ways to help the “greater good”. An estimated 3.3 million people volunteer abroad annually (Mostafanezhad 2014: 6), most commonly in voluntourism projects, or short-term volunteer commitments matching their personal interests (Lyons and Wearing 2008: 120). The ‘alternative’ form of tourism is characterized by the combination of travel and volunteering, typically in development or conservation-oriented activities aimed at improving a host community (Conran 2011: 1454). In voluntourism, tourists volunteer part of their time abroad in community-based projects primarily consisting of construction, teaching, physical labor, childcare, and other forms of community-service.

Volunteer tourism seeks to connect the desire to travel and explore with the desire to make a difference. By doing so, voluntourism promises to reconfigure the tourist destination as an “interactive space where tourists become creative actors who engage in behaviors that are mutually beneficial to host communities, and to the cultural and social environment of those communities” (Lyons and Wearing 2008: 6). Voluntourism seeks to make a difference to the lives not only of those served, but also of the servers as well (Lyons and Wearing 48). The voluntourist is “one who chooses to use their free time to engage in meaningful experiences, such as helping others in need, restoring the environment, immersing themselves in another culture and then stepping back into their own world a changed person” (Lyons and Wearing 69). Bailey and Russell (2010), argue that volunteer tourism experience has a positive long-term impact on participants’ civic attitudes, openness, and wisdom (Kirillova et al. 2015: 383). Benefits for the tourist also include “enjoyment, satisfaction, self-confidence, cross-cultural

exchange, the development of new skills, social networking... and an increased interest in social and environmental justice, increased awareness of self, increased awareness of others, and, ultimately, personal growth and development” (Lyons and Wearing 2008: 86). Volunteer tourism thus creates opportunities for tourists to reflect on their home cultures and lives while experiencing various forms of connection with another.

Central to volunteer tourism is the assumption that these volunteer projects can and should bring about positive impacts to host communities (Luh Sin et al. 2015: 120). Lisa Malkki notes that people are often motivated to do volunteer work based on the desire to “help,” aid, or otherwise become part of something greater than themselves (Malkki 2015: 134). A student who spent a weekend in Yaxunah during her time in México emphasized that in thinking about volunteering and voluntourism, she often imagined a sort of “greater good” or “humanity” that volunteers were working to fuel and create. This focus on helping another community differentiates voluntourism from other types of tourism and is one of the primary expectations and motivations volunteers bring with them on their voluntourism trips. The desire to help the greater good can sound like an enjoyable and noble cause, but for all of the voluntourists I interviewed throughout my research, this expectation caused discomfort upon actually spending time in the Yaxunah community. This discomfort and uneasiness is emblematic of the encounter in voluntourism between voluntourist and host community due to an intertwining of political, economic, and social hierarchies with the motivations and expectations associated with voluntourism. In Chapter Three, I explore these motivations and expectations and how they create an affective and emotional environment of discomfort for volunteers when they set out to complete their volunteer projects in Yaxunah.

Many scholars note potential benefits for both tourists and host communities in this form of alternative tourism. El Said and Patja (2015) argue that volunteering is based on helping others 'in need,' but is also personally rewarding, allowing volunteers to feel they are "making a difference" (cited in Malkki 148). Everingham (2015) adds that volunteer tourists can also be motivated by cultural immersion, friendship, pleasures, pleasure, and opportunities to travel and learn about another place (Everingham 178). Volunteer tourism feeds off of the desire to do good, while also remaining separate and intentionally not too out of one's comfort zone, by allowing for very short-term projects in which volunteers can "give back" or help those in need.

Due to its temporality and inability to produce lasting, structural change, voluntourism has faced much critique, yet its popularity continues to rise. Some conclude this is because volunteer tourism represents a growing "consumer consciousness" of global economic, social, and political inequalities (Mostafanezhad 2014: 3). Volunteer tourists take part in an alternative form of travel, seeking to "inject the moral responsibilities of work into the leisure travel experience" (Luh Sin et al. 124). Conran argues volunteer tourism has the transformative potential to contribute to broader social and global justice agendas (Conran 2011: 1467). Malkki (2015) adds that it aims to extend humanitarian goals of responding to the "suffering of others regardless of their identity, to act selflessly, to do what can be done to save lives, and to place humanity above all other considerations" (Malkki 2015: 6). The influence of discourse about humanitarianism and voluntourism from humanitarian aid groups, social media, advertisements, and volunteer agency websites suggests foreigners have a clear role abroad, and will be welcomed with open arms into faraway and 'exotic' communities. I explore here how this discourse alongside the experience of voluntourism influences how both travelers and host community members encounter, interact, and imagine one another. While voluntourism

definitely presents a platform for helping others in need and travelling the world, it also is in the market of selling people, cultures, emotions, and affective experiences.

While optimistic perspectives on voluntourism are presented prominently in advertising and travel reviews, negative outlooks, such as this one by Barkham (2006), communicate an alternative viewpoint on the impacts on tourist, host community, and the broader global economy involved in the exchange. Speaking of an adult voluntourism group from the UK, Barkham explains:

first they went climbing in Kathmandu. Then they stumbled into a local school and taught English to baffled Nepalese. Fifty spliffs and a thousand emails later, they returned home with a Hindu charm and tie-dye trousers. They had lots of great stories but the world remained thoroughly unsaved. (Lyons and Wearing 2008: 49)

The power hierarchy that results from European- and US-driven neocolonialism and capitalism in Latin America creates the circumstances for voluntourism to occur and allows it to thrive. Volunteer tourism runs the potential of both “accepting and reproducing the structural inequalities” upon which the encounter is based (Conran 2011: 1463-64). While volunteer work and humanitarian aid may seem to strive toward a flattening of power hierarchies by aiding those in need and striving for political neutrality, the industries are especially inseparable from power, as one group is always doing the giving, while another does the receiving. Barnett and Weiss argue that:

humanitarian organizations have been in painful self-denial about their relationship to power, preferring to see themselves as weak and vulnerable as those whom they are helping. But their growing resources, their broader ambitions, and their relationship to global structures puts front and center the issue of power (Barnett and Weiss 2008: 9).

Despite the structural inequalities and disparities in power present in voluntourism, the discourse surrounding the industry by voluntourism companies and their advertisements seeks to

push aside this issue in hopes of surpassing or skirting around the issue as to further promote their industry. The voluntourism industry does so by emphasizing the promises of intimate relationships between volunteers and those they are helping (Conran 2011: 1454), of feeling like part of a greater humanity, and of connecting beyond difference.

In the subsequent sections, I explore first how the voluntourism industry sells, and thus commodifies, people and their cultures. The Yucatecan voluntourism market sells a specific, authentic Maya culture that draws visitors to the region specifically to witness this fabled civilization. Secondly, I look at how voluntourism is in the market of selling affective experiences. Voluntourism offers the opportunity to feel good about oneself, to feel one is making a contribution to helping others, to develop relationships, and to experience transformation of the self and the world through volunteering abroad. Yaxunah's voluntourism project includes ways in which volunteers can form the "lasting relationships" advertised by voluntourism companies, and seeks to work within this framework to appeal to those who are seeking affective experiences and transformations in voluntourism.

MAYA CULTURAL TOURISM: SELLING CULTURE AND AUTHENTICITY

In efforts to connect humankind or "create lasting relationships," voluntourism projects often consequentially commodify poverty and the experiences of the people who live in these communities. This means that people are reduced to their poverty, difference, and ethnic background and sold as an image of "authentic" culture and people from a certain place. In the case of the Yucatán, Maya culture is commodified through its reduction to certain myths, histories, symbols, and images and sold as a single, consumable product. Fernandez Repetto (2014) elaborates on this commodification and essentialization in voluntourism and its impacts:

volunteer tourism is a neoliberal practice that justifies and legitimizes the participation of individuals and non-profit organizations in the social and economic development of the Global South. In the same direction, it should be noted that the practices associated with volunteer tourism rarely lead to the questioning of the structural social inequalities. By contrast, it tends to “aestheticize” poverty as something authentic and cultural (Fernandez Repetto 2014: 13).

The aestheticization of poverty, alongside the commodification and spectacularization of culture and peoples, creates an environment for tourists ridden with mystery and myth. Volunteer tourists come to the Yucatán with a specific image of Maya culture in mind, that which is sold by the tourism industry, but also come with the expectation of seeing poverty “up close” as part of the experience. Voluntourism is based off of “helping” those in poverty through short-term volunteer projects, but when entire communities, cultures, and people are reduced to their poverty, and when that poverty is seen as something glamorous, authentic, or cultural, voluntourism essentializes the people and cultures it sells. In the Yucatán, this essentialization masked as humanitarianism is evident in Maya cultural tourism, which plays a strong role in the region’s tourism industry, especially in selling rural, indigenous, “Maya” communities, culture, and lifestyles as a commodity and consumable product.

In the Yucatán Peninsula, “Maya” is the name of an ethnic-cultural group and also refers to speakers of the Yucatec Maya language spoken in various regions of the Yucatán Peninsula (osea-cite.org). Yet, beyond these definitions, the term “Maya” is complicated by a tourism industry that seeks to portray an authentic version of this culture. “Authentic” Maya culture is created, recreated, and performed by the tourism industry in a specific way that does not account for the region’s diversity or present-day existence. Bianet Castellanos (2010) points out that “Maya is not a homogenous, stable ethnic identity, but rather has been constituted over time by state policies, ethnopolitics, racial hierarchies, and the global economy” (Bianet Castellanos

xxxv). The tourism industry both creates and performs Maya culture through images, advertisements, names of landmarks, language, and the creation of tourist sites and attractions.

The voluntourism industry is in the market of selling culture and people as authentic ways to experience a place different from one's own home. When talking about culture, I refer to the created and recreated representation of practices, traditions, languages, and values particular to a specific group of people in a specific place. Cultural tourism appeals to tourists' desires to discover the Other, primarily through the presentation of authentic and exotic cultures, which emphasize and often exaggerate people's differences. While some tourist destinations have been in the market of creating built environments such as resorts, the Yucatán has worked in heritage restoration, the creation and recreation of tradition, culture, and history as forms of self-definition (AlSayyad 2001: 2). The industry's work in selling culture reconstructs the idea of culture itself, and presents it as a homogenous image that seeks to describe an entire group of people, the Maya for example, who may occupy a community, region, country, or even continent. According to Castañeda (1996):

culture is produced and reproduced as these reified representations and totalizing tropes of a group, people, or community. This is 'the culture of' a people, that pattern constructed and objectified in discourse as an imaginary embodiment of an imaginary collectivity... culture is always an argument... the real pattern, the 'lived-in culture,' is an abstraction embodied in its own representation of an imagined world and not in the supposedly real world outside of its reification" (Castañeda 17)

Culture is created through representations, such as archeological sites and ruins, of the authentic essence of a community or place. Advertisements for the Yucatán region consistently feature images of archeological sites, gods and goddesses, and people in "tribal" paint and clothing, creating this image of Mayaness as an ancient, noble, and simple society stuck in time. Archeological sites that promote this historical image of Maya culture are "strategic

orchestrations of both knowledge of the Maya and the production of this knowledge.” Further, they are an apparatus through which Maya culture is invented and continually reinvented (Castañeda 1996: 98). When tour groups come through the Yucatán and are being sold an image of a particular type of authentic Maya culture and people, local communities often shift their practices, displays, and language to appeal to this image that has been crafted by the tourism industry. This image is especially present in central Yucatán, where Maya ruins, civilization, gods, and stories are sold and consumed as part of the experience in travel to the region. In order to appeal to this market, some communities do not have the chance to advocate for their own definition of Maya-ness, and end up perpetuating an exoticized and essentialized image of Maya culture and people.

This is the case in Fernandez Repetto’s work, which follows a community in the Yucatán that does not have control over the tourism project based locally in their town. Although the tourism project is popular and has brought many visitors to the community, the lack of full ownership over the site has meant a shift in the practices of the community in order to cater to the tourist population.

the fundamental strategy of [the tourism project] consists of presenting and forming an ‘essentialized,’ exoticized, and estheticized vision of Maya culture both for locals as well as for volunteer tourists, recreating the strategies of spectacularization of community cultural heritage during the visits of volunteer tourists. As part of these strategies, tourism projects resort to restructuring and refocusing certain cultural practices in order to meet the demands of volunteer tourists and the international development agency that owns and promotes the project (Fernandez Repetto 2014: 12).

When a community is forced to shift their own practices to cater to a foreign public, the consequences can be detrimental to local culture, languages, traditions, and attitudes. For example, if a community learns to modify their practices to accommodate for presentation to travelers, value in one’s original culture and community can suffer. The Maya ethnic group,

language, history, and traditions become a spectacle through this process, and work alongside the decades-long project of creating and recreating a constructed image of Maya culture in tourism in Mexico.

One of cultural tourism's primary selling points and draws for tourists is its promise of authenticity. As I mention in the introduction, "authentic" is a term that signifies a representation of a specific group from one specific time period. Authenticity in cultural tourism places much value on visual materials, images and the production and reproduction of cultural representations (Whittaker 1999: 37). The "authentic" image of Maya culture is an "ahistorical and fixed representation" (Bianet Castellanos 2010: xxvi) of identity and culture superimposed onto an entire diverse region. In the Yucatán, cultural tourism is based on created Maya indigenous heritage and traditions that form the basis for the principal tourist attractions (Baud and Ypeij 2009: 1).

The desire to travel to exotic, different, or Other cultures and places in search of authentic experiences can be attributed to what John Urry has labeled the "tourist gaze." Urry (1990) suggests that contemporary tourists seek authenticity and truth away from their home environments, and develop this sort of gaze in the ways in which their imaginaries about a place and its people interact with their physical environment abroad (Urry 1-4). A study by Watanabe (1995), demonstrates how tourists primarily imagine the Maya in two modalities: as the romantic pre-Columbian civilization or as the poor, victimized and marginalized current rural population (Little 2004: 262). With this image in mind, tourists often flock to the Yucatán in search of that created culture of the Maya as "stuck in the past" due in part to this "tourist gaze," which suggests tourists are inclined to consume Third World cultures and environments that are "exotic" and "world away" from their own (AlSayyad 2001: 4-5). By desiring a certain authentic

“Maya,” the tourism industry is in the market of creating a global system in which host communities are at once “helped” develop by voluntourists, but also prompted to continue acting out their “traditional” ways of living in order to continue to appeal to foreign travelers. In volunteer tourism, travelers seek direct cultural contact with these constructed Other people and their ways of life through service (Baud and Ypeij 2009: 4). Voluntourism allows for this direct interaction, the encounter, to surface. The encounter in voluntourism in the Yucatán is filled both with the expectations and desires for authenticity stemming from the “tourist gaze” and the desire for the feel-good sensation of forming relationships with and helping “Maya” people.

VOLUNTOURISM AS AFFECT AND TRANSFORMATION

The voluntourism industry sells emotions and emotional affect in their advertisements, photos, and promises. By affect, I refer to the sort of experiences and emotions that deeply move someone, add meaning to their lives, leave them in awe, overwhelm them with emotion, or otherwise cause them to feel and react (Picard 2012: 1-12). Voluntourism sells affective experiences through its promises of transformation either of the self or the other through interactions, encounters, and volunteer work.

Paula, a former participant in the CCC’s voluntourism project in Yaxunah states that volunteering abroad is an opportunity to bring you closer to a common humanity, something along the lines of a common human race (Paula Interview: 1/29). This image of a “humanity” that a volunteer can save or help is forefront in the voluntourism narrative and is an example of the sort of transformation in affective experiences that the voluntourism industry sells. Volunteer tourism promises the chance for a “life-changing experience” and is marketed through emotionally moving means, “by showing images of smiling local children joyous at the help that

they have received or the sad faces of those still in need” (Crossley 2012: 87). These emotive expressions of people with which volunteers will work adds to the images of culture and poverty also consumed by voluntourists in creating their narrative about a place and its people. The idea that volunteers can help transform a community strongly contributed to volunteers’ expectations when going to volunteer in Yaxunah. Because they were told they could help, the volunteers I spoke to felt uncomfortable when they confronted the reality of the limits of their short stay and less significant role. Discomfort in the voluntourist experience in Yaxunah, which I explore further in Chapter Three, can be attributed to the political economy of voluntourism, interested in selling essentialized images of cultures and peoples along with affective experiences and expectations that volunteers can “make a difference.”

Secondly, voluntourism sells affective experiences and transformations of the self that also strongly influence how volunteers enter a community. By expecting an experience of self-transformation based on volunteer work and encountering other places and people, volunteers are sold an experience that both helps humanity and helps further the self. As a more “interactive, enduring and reciprocal practice, volunteer tourism is recognized as having the potential to affect and develop the selves of its participants more profoundly” (Crossley 2012: 86). Voluntourism allows one to encounter and be changed internally through interactions with poverty, a central element to the voluntourism exchange that serves as both its foundation and goal to eliminate (Crossley 2012: 89-91). Because volunteers will leave the site of their work after their trip, they are sold the idea that they too will take home benefits from the experience of giving to another community. Volunteers are told they can “make a change while also having fun: they offer an ‘exciting and personally inspiring experience and... memories that will be with you forever’” (Vodopivec 2011: 119). Voluntourism sells self-transformation through volunteer work. Thus,

volunteers' expectations are affected and influenced by this notion that they will not only impact the world and be moved emotionally, but that they will also receive a personal, transformative experience.

VOLUNTOURISM IN YAXUNAH

By working to develop mechanisms to cater to the needs and desires of travelers and the tourism industry, Yaxunah has become a destination for volunteer tourism among student groups from the United States engaging in study abroad programs, research projects, and immersion trips. Yaxunah's voluntourism project allows for a focused exploration of the intricacies and complexities of the encounter between tourist and host. In order to further unpack this encounter and its significance for travel and tourism, I explain here the context of Yaxunah's voluntourism endeavors. In understanding the mechanisms in place to organize and create the voluntourism experience, one can more easily focus in on the encounter and how it plays out in Yaxunah.

Yaxunah's interactions with foreigners through the CCC are primarily in the form of volunteer groups that spend weekends in the community. The CCC often hosts groups of students from the US who are studying abroad, such as my U.S.-based group studying in Mérida. The community hosts groups primarily during March, November, and during the summer. Yaxunah's experience with voluntourism is unique because of the community's efforts to maintain a community-centered position when in the decision-making process about hosting a new group and in the implementation of these projects.

Yaxunah's process of hosting volunteers is particularly interesting to examine because of its high level of autonomy, meaning the community has control over the decision-making process of what projects to do with volunteers and where and how they will spend their time in

the community. Homestays and meals are primary ways in which tourists get to interact with their host communities. The unique process of community decision-making that is present in the governance of the CCC and the community perspective as a whole continue in the process of hosting volunteers. Elias Alcocer Puerto, the contact person for volunteer groups who want to visit Yaxunah, usually is able to meet with the students prior to their visit to the community to both provide them with context on the town and to determine which sort of activities would best suit their abilities as a group (Elias interview 1-23). Back at the CCC, Maria explains, “when a large group of volunteers comes, we get together to decide what activities and projects we can do to help the whole community and take a vote on what projects we will do with the group” (Maria Interview: 1/14). For Yaxunah, hosting volunteers is a way to interact with visitors in a more intimate way, by sharing homes, meals, and volunteer work, that also benefits the community as whole. The focus on community engagement and benefit largely stems from the community’s previous controversies and conflicts surrounding tourism, in efforts to resist a hierarchical system or the onset of major inequalities in the town. The communal form of decision making makes the project different from its peers who do not have control over allocating their own funds, and allows residents of Yaxunah to be more self-sufficient, have a voice in how their community is viewed by outsiders, and, according to Jorge Tomás, take pride in their community and culture.

At the CCC, volunteers can expect to work *with* community youth in projects and community service work instead of simply *for* them. While this model does not guarantee friendship and conversation between the two groups will ensue, it definitely creates the circumstances for a more engaged volunteering experience. Volunteers are invited to participate in a diverse set of activities, including conservation projects, classes or activity periods with

children, construction work, cleaning and maintenance of the site, and reforestation initiatives. The work is relatively simple, as the primary purpose is to connect two groups of people, and less to make a significant impact in the community as a whole, as this is unattainable in one weekend, according to Elias. Elias continues,

They are simple projects. We cannot do big projects because there just isn't time. If, for example, a group stays for a week, a month, they can do a more concrete project. This is what visitors need to understand as well. That they are not going to save the world, we are going to do a project that may be concrete or it may be very, very small (Elias Interview: 1/23).

As I elaborate upon in Chapter Three, Elias' remarks demonstrate the different perspective the community has towards volunteers and voluntourism. For Yaxunah youth, interacting with volunteer groups is just another way to spend a few hours socializing and working outside on a weekend. For families, primarily older women in the community, volunteer groups are also an opportunity to make money, an opportunity not present in other forms in the community. Primarily engaged in a self-sufficient lifestyle, there are very few opportunities to earn a regular salary. Volunteers thus provide a source of income for the community, as they must pay for accommodations, meals, snacks, and water during their time in Yaxunah.

Yaxunah has two community groups to organize visitors during their time in the town: x maj hanah and lol-kum. X maj hanah, which means "to rent houses" in Maya, is a group of fourteen women who host volunteers on a rotating basis. To ensure one family does not gain more than other members of the group, when volunteers come the community, they are placed in homes on a rotating schedule. Host families provide access for volunteers to a toilet with semi-running water and the security of a concrete room with a lock and key. The second group that works to organize volunteer stays is Lol-kum, a committee of women who organize and rotate the meal schedule for volunteers. This unique opportunity to eat inside the homes of local

families also sets Yaxunah apart from other forms of voluntourism in which the volunteers stay and eat separately. Once again, the group organizing meals operates on a rotating schedule, ensuring all members have equal opportunity to interact with and receive money from visitors to the community. The focus on community ties together how volunteers work on projects in the community, where they stay, where they eat, and with whom they exchange money and time. The system allows for a more intimate look inside the lives of people who live in Yaxunah with which the volunteers work.

In Yaxunah, volunteers come primarily from the nearby Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán (UADY) or from the United States. Students from UADY began volunteering in the community before the CCC's 2010 opening, but for the purposes of my project, I focus primarily on the presence of U.S. student volunteers in the community, as these encounters with the more distant "Other" allow for exposure to different languages, foods, culture, and lifestyles that produce the sort of encounter I seek to examine. Yet, the presence of UADY student volunteers in the community has still played a significant role in Yaxunah's development as a site visited by outsiders. UADY students began as volunteers primarily working with the environment, inspiring Yaxunah to form its own environmental youth volunteer organization, Jaguares de Yaxunah. In 2013, UADY began to have an even bigger presence in the community, bringing students many weekends to do presentations and workshops in public health, youth leadership, and sustainable environmental practices, among others (Jorge Tomás Interview: 1/17). These student volunteers continue to have a presence in the community, usually for day trips or weekends, and include students from multiple disciplines doing a diverse set of projects from donating books to the library to giving presentations on the installation and maintenance of solar panels.

UADY students in the community not only means seeing volunteers on the weekends, but also represents the presence and attention of larger organizations in the community. UADY as an institution had a new interest and awareness in the community based on their volunteering trips, and began in the early 2000s to offer scholarships and grant opportunities for Yaxunah, which allowed for an increase in university enrollments from Yaxunah at the same time as increased access to middle and high school was also becoming available. Alongside UADY as an outside presence in the community were representatives from the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), the Yucatán Cultural Foundation (FCY), and the two aforementioned anthropologists, Elias Alcocer Puerto and Grace Bascopé (Elias Interview: 1/23). These outside groups are often focused on studying the archeological site, improving livelihoods in rural populations in the state, and giving grants for further development. These outside actors allowed for the circumstances by which Yaxunah was able to form a tourism project on their own terms, as a community-based and community-beneficial endeavor.

For tourists preparing to enter Yaxunah, the expectations are very much about individual endeavors in a new place, forming connections with people in this place, and finding a personal role for oneself in this community. This is connected to the voluntourism industry's selling of emotion and affective experiences in volunteering and encountering host communities. Because the idea that volunteers can transform themselves and others are at the forefront of the voluntourism narrative, the voluntourists whom I interviewed said they expected to find connections with people who they would be then able to help. My group was told we would be making a lasting impact on this community by both learning from them and helping through our volunteer projects. Yet, upon my return to Yaxunah in January 2016, nobody in the community,

including the family with which I stayed, remembered my name, face, or anyone in my volunteer group. It became evident that while we were basing our image of Yaxunah around our individual times in the community, Yaxunah's perspective differed. While my weekend in Yaxunah was very significant to me, and even inspired me to write this thesis, the community did not remember my name. During my time in Yaxunah, I heard from many community members that the presence of volunteers and outsiders has made more of an impact in the long-term, with individual people and weekends serving a less significant role. This difference in perspective on voluntourism gives great insight in examining the encounter between the two actors in the exchange.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ENCOUNTER

Volunteering provides the tourist with a different sort of encounter than would other forms of tourism, as volunteer work brings tourists side-by-side with the Other. In this chapter, I begin with a scholarly literature review focusing on the encounter in tourism and volunteer tourism, continue by contextualizing the encounter as it takes place in Yaxunah, and finally I explore the discomfort in the encounter amongst volunteers and its connection to Yaxunah's community perspective on the voluntourism exchange.

Various scholars have worked with the realm of the encounter when analyzing humanitarianism, volunteering, and travel, and have formed a theoretical background with which I frame my research surrounding Yaxunah. Many volunteer tourism organizations cite the interactions between volunteers and their hosts as perhaps the most vital component of the volunteer tourism experience for both parties (Lyons and Wearing 2008: 20). Gibson (2010) argues, "beyond its industrial and labor market structure, at the heart of tourism is encounter – perhaps its defining, distinguishing feature" (Mostafanezhad and Hannam 2014: 6). The "encounter" to which I refer is found in the "immediate, embodied, and geographical" interactions, which can take many physical and imagined forms (Gibson 2010: 521). Encounters between tourists and host community members can be more material and visible, such as the interactions and exchanges between groups of people on tours, when asking questions, when reading advertisements, when purchasing souvenirs, or when being served in a restaurant. In addition to the physical encounter lies an imagined encounter with a group of people, in which created identities and histories dominate the mind and tourists' internal narrative. Imagined encounters also include the expectations and perspectives that tourists and hosts have about one another, their own identity and role, and their experience in a place and with a group of people.

Even though two groups of people may occupy a shared space by working together on a project, to paint a wall for example, their visions of their own role, the people they are “helping” or interacting with, and the interaction taking place may differ drastically based on each group’s perspective and the images of each other they have previously consumed. While not all of these interactions may emerge in every tourist experience, tourists’ and hosts’ imagined image of the Other is prevalent in many forms of tourism, especially in cultural and volunteer tourism. I will explore further here how the encounter in Yaxunah is both material and imagined, and how this encounter is experienced, perceived, and communicated by both sides of the interaction.

The encounter in voluntourism is intertwined with the imagined identities, roles, histories, and lives of both tourist and host community. Before, during, and after travelling, tourists’ images of those who live in their destination is created and shaped through interactions with local culture, peoples, and environments. Russell Staiff (2013) argues that culture and heritage produce imaginaries (Staiff et al. 19) and that imaginaries work alongside physical encounters to formulate one’s experience in travel and exchange. According to Staiff, “a willingness to imagine is a prerequisite for this kind of tourism,” but the tourist also occupies a physical space that she or he experiences with their “sensory as well as their imaginary capacity” (Staiff et al. 31). MacCannell (2011) also believes in the importance of imaginaries to characterize an essential part of the voluntourism encounter. For MacCannell, “fantasy is the only thing that easily and naturally occupies the moral no man’s land between tourists and the people who live in the place they visit” (Mostafanezhad and Hannam 2014: 28). The imagined element of the encounter directly impacts how both tourists and host communities experience the physical encounter, and the two overlap in many ways, of which I explore in the context of Yaxunah.

The encounter is of particular interest to anthropologists and historians, as it presents a framework to explore how two different societies interact and exchange certain elements of their cultures by focusing on people and their individual actions within the larger frameworks of structural power and hierarchy. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) classifies these spaces of encounter that are intertwined with domination and subordination discourse as “contact zones”: social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other (Pratt 7). Within these contact zones, imagined identities and cultures of the Other prevailed as the primary way in which Europeans viewed the Americas during the conquest (Pratt 6). For Pratt, the imagined identities of “the other side” influenced how these groups interacted upon physical encounter. These imagined identities and perceptions of the Other still endure today both at home and in the voluntourism field and affect how the two sides of the voluntourism encounter envision and interact with each other. Although volunteer tourists may claim to enter their site without preconceived notions about the population they are helping, the prevalence of these stereotypes in a U.S. tourists’ learned environment of Western-dominance and Third World inferiority mean these perspectives still take hold when entering the voluntourism site and encountering those they are there to “help.”

The encounter between tourist and host community is most interesting for my research because it frames the voluntourism experience as one that is personal, affective, emotional, and intertwined with discourse about making tourism more “ethical” and “responsible,” but also has created an experience filled with discomfort for tourists. A sense of discomfort emerged for our group, as tourists, in interactions with Yaxunah community members in the nature of our volunteer work, our presence as outsiders, and the temporality of our visit. Most prominently, discomfort emerged when volunteers confronted their expectations, incapacity to make lasting

change, the small-scale of the projects, and the sense of separation from the community despite sharing physical space. I explore this discomfort in the voluntourism encounter for tourists by examining how the Yucatán voluntourism industry sells altruism, experience, Maya culture, transformation, affect, and “making a difference” as the primary forms of encounter, and how these expectations and motivations often fall short in the lived experience of voluntourism as told by tourists. Because one of the primary expectations of voluntourists is the experience of being “exposed” to a new place and people, physical discomfort such as uneasy sleeping, trying new foods, or experiencing new weather conditions can be somewhat expected. Yet, the sort of discomfort I analyze is more internal and is part of the imagined encounter between tourist and host. This discomfort is an affective, visceral experience that tourists in my research felt when encountering the host community of Yaxunah. Levy describes discomfort as an affective experience of “unease, alienation, and entrapment” in encountering an unfamiliar or otherwise unexpected situation (Levy 2015: 39). The volunteer tourists I interviewed throughout my research all spoke of their experience with feeling discomfort emotionally and mentally due to their positionality, purpose, and expectations upon arriving in and volunteering in Yaxunah. Through an exploration of the imagined encounter, I seek to examine how voluntourism fosters this environment of discomfort, whether intentionally or not, and how this impacts the volunteer tourism experience for tourists and host community members.

THE ENCOUNTER IN YAXUNAH

In the encounter in Yaxunah, the imaginary realms of encounter very much influence the physical encounters that take place. Each side of the encounter tells a different story of the imagined purpose, role, and impact of voluntourism based on previous knowledge about the

other culture, their physical interactions in the community, and how they think about one another after volunteers go back home. Through examining the physical and imagined encounters in Yaxunah by speaking with previous volunteers, learning from and interacting with community members, and personally experiencing life in the community during my two trips there, I explore this physical shared space intertwined with the imagined realms of separation experienced by volunteers and the host community in voluntourism in Yaxunah.

The encounter in Yaxunah is one in which volunteers and their hosts share a physical space, but remain separate in the many realms of the imaginary encounter. In sharing volunteer work, homes, meals, and conversations, the CCC voluntourism project allows for ample opportunities for travelers to take part in interactions and shared experiences with the host community. Yet, in the realm of the imagined encounter, the two groups remain very separate. Interactions between locals and tourists “entail more than simple transactions of money for goods or services. They also involve the exchange of expectations, stereotypes, and expressions of ethnicity and culture” (Stronza 2008: 244). The ways in which community members and volunteers imagine their own roles and the roles of the other group differ in numerous ways. A sense of separation between the two groups forms through perceptions of the other, perceptions of the self, and perspectives on voluntourism’s purpose. Additionally, many volunteers with whom I interviewed remarked upon their sense of physical and mental discomfort with the voluntourism encounter. Not only were volunteers experiencing new physical challenges such as sleeping in a hammock and rationing out clean water, but they were also experiencing imagined, emotional challenges. The volunteers’ discomfort stemmed from their sudden recognition of their role in the power hierarchies embedded in voluntourism, their inability to connect with the

community members in such a short amount of time, and the inability of volunteer groups to “make a difference,” as they were told they would be doing in advance of their trip.

Through Yaxunah’s systems of organization for visitors and their experience in the community, the CCC allows for ample opportunities to speak with, learn about, and interact directly with community members. These physical interactions of sharing spaces through the homestay rotation system and sharing meals in different homes create the spaces for conversation, interaction, and sharing of stories. Work at the CCC that places local volunteers with tourists allows for a shared project and collaboration, physical labor that is worked on together. Nora, one of the women with which I ate meals for two of my days in Yaxunah, explained how she enjoyed having volunteers in her home. Although they stay in a separate concrete room a few steps away from the rest of the house, volunteers often spend time in the kitchen area learning Maya, eating Yucatecan food, and sharing stories. Nora says the visitors generally enjoy the opportunity to co-exist and live with another family, and for that reason often seek out the opportunity to spend time in the house learning about and from the family, learning about the community, and learning some of the local language (Nora interview: 1/15). From a local perspective, these shared spaces not only signify an opportunity to connect with those outside the community. Although many enjoy this opportunity, the interaction is ultimately a monetary exchange. Because there are few ways to make a salary or wage in the town, besides work at three small stores that sell snacks and Coca-Cola products, hosting volunteers is a way to earn money.

Despite the shared spaces in homes, the CCC, and around the community, many students who have visited Yaxunah for voluntourism excursions express a sense of separation between themselves and those who live in Yaxunah. This feeling of separation is narrated through

personal experience of awkwardness, unspoken differences, and discomfort. For these visitors, whether they refer to themselves as tourists, students, or volunteers, travelling to Yaxunah was an individual experience in which they were told they would make a difference and learn about a new place. For the community, exposure to visitors as a whole and over time is what was regarded as most important, with the individual who only comes for one weekend holding much less value, both economically and socially. This perspective begins the analysis into the separation in the imagined encounter between visitors and the host community. I explore two significant realms of the imagined encounter that are relevant in Yaxunah's CCC: visitors' discomfort and Yaxunah's perspective on the broader presence of foreigners in the community, both of which provide insight into how the exchange in voluntourism is complex, embedded in power structures, and not imagined in the same ways by each side of the encounter.

DISCOMFORT IN THE VOLUNTEER'S ENCOUNTER

Every one of the visitors I interview who had participated in the voluntourism activities of the CCC in Yaxunah expressed that they felt discomfort throughout their experience in the community. Discomfort was most obviously a matter of the physical encounter, as visitors are exposed to a new and often uncomfortable environment. Some examples of the physical discomfort described by visitors include sleeping in hammocks under mosquito nets, encountering frightening insects, not showering for three days, eating new foods, being dehydrated, getting sunburnt, and performing physical labor work. But alongside these more obvious physical discomforts, the story of voluntourism in Yaxunah can be more deeply examined through an exploration of discomfort in the imagined encounter. Conflicting expectations, a feeling of separation, confusion over one's own role, and the nature of the short-

term volunteer work all contributed to this common thread of discomfort experienced by visitors to the community who participated in voluntourism.

Discomfort among volunteers in the community stemmed originally from their expectations prior to entering the community. Student groups who arrive in Yaxunah do so after meeting with Elias, who gives the groups an information and preparation session about entering the community. Volunteers also have spent time packing, learning about the work they will be doing, and thinking about their role entering this community for one weekend. One particular student grappled with the idea of entering this community amidst the negative connotation she has with the activity based on a previous experience:

People say its 'life-changing', you spend a little bit of time with those people and then you come home. Whether they help these native or indigenous communities is debatable. Last year a group from my school went to a rural community and gave a woman a stove, and she was the only one in the community that had a stove, and it really caused a rift in the community. So going out and building buildings and spending time with the kids may not be the best thing (Paula Interview: 1/29).

Discourse surrounding voluntourism in the United States is not always positive despite the idealistic advertising and rhetoric by voluntourism companies. Westerners' roles, if there are any, in rural foreign communities has been hotly contested, especially among students studying international development and anthropology. This student had learned to question her role in communities in which she was sent to "help," yet still had to confront the fact that she was to enter the community as per requirement of her study abroad program.

I think that people especially in the United States think of the global community as the Other, as something that these people need to be brought to our level. For that reason I kind of have a negative connotation with voluntourism, and that affected my time in Yaxunah... People going out to save or help whether or not its required of them or needed or to the benefit of the community they're trying to help (Paula Interview: 1/29)

The expectations surrounding voluntourism affect how volunteers envision their time in a community, and how they envision their own role in the interaction. When told they would be helping a community, learning about a new place, and being exposed to a different, foreign culture, volunteers questioned their own role as volunteers, and what place they have as “helpers” in a place about which they knew little. Another student who questioned what she had been told prior to her experience in Yaxunah was also uncomfortable with the expectations she was made to have about Yaxunah:

I think it's really important especially in voluntourism in general, and this is a topic that happened a lot at our school, is that you are not going to save someone, you are not going to make someone's life better because maybe they don't need it or they don't want it. I think its really important that you are going to listen more than you are going to talk, which I think is a lot of the missionary or voluntourism groups here, especially those that are only like 3 days... just listening is the most important thing to keep in mind in volunteer tourism (Lily Interview 12/17)

Expectations play a large role in how volunteers enter Yaxunah, and connect to a larger message of volunteering, humanitarianism, and helping the “greater good” as something possible and encouraged for those with privilege from the U.S. In preparation for going to Yaxunah, students noted their unease with being told they could help a community about which they knew very little as part of their discomfort with the larger narrative of the incapacities of short-term volunteer work to make larger changes. Discomfort among volunteers in their encounter with Yaxunah and its people begins here in the preparation for the excursion, and continues throughout the experience, as its temporality makes the expectation of lasting change and connection challenging to see fulfilled.

Another element of discomfort prevalent in the volunteer experience in the encounter with Yaxunah and its people in the sense of separation described by all of the visitors I interviewed throughout my research. A sense of separation from Yaxunah during the

voluntourism experience seems contradictory to the many mechanisms that town has developed in order to foster togetherness between hosts and volunteers, such as homestays, sharing meals, and working alongside community members in projects. Despite physically sharing spaces, volunteers noted a sense of separation that was evident in the realm of the imagined encounter. Separation was described as part of the differences in each group's perspective of voluntourism, the discomfort with encountering the structural inequalities upon which voluntourism is built, and the inability to communicate beyond a surface level. One student expressed how she felt a sense of separation during her time in the community:

Especially when we went to Yaxunah, I felt a complete separation the whole time. I mean we all spoke Spanish, but we could feel the choice to be separate when they all only spoke Maya and we only spoke English. And its like even though we have a language to connect with, we chose to be separate and there was, like, the awkwardness. And I think it's because we felt awkward coming from this place of privilege, like we have money to come to Mérida and now we have money to come to you and improve your community by *us* working with you, which has gotta be awkward for them as well because, I mean, even though we're not like that, you can't help but think these people coming into your community, are they really there to help? I don't know, I felt very separate. (Lily interview 12/17)

Volunteers in interviews also noted their sense of discomfort with having to realize and encounter their own privilege, especially in experiencing the wealth inequalities that make voluntourism possible. In Yaxunah, volunteers felt separated from community members despite their physical closeness because of this wealth disparity and difference in upbringing and background. One of the places in which several volunteers noted more discomfort was during mealtimes. Although Yaxunah has made strides by creating a system in which volunteers can eat in homes of local residents, making the experience more immersive for visitors, the experience of being served and paying to enter a person's home caused volunteers to feel uncomfortable

with their presence in the home. Paula remarked on her meal experience paired with her questioning about her presence as a volunteer and white U.S. student in the community:

the separation occurred particularly when we were in large groups and particularly at meal times because we would eat by ourselves and only had one house where we ate... and she was so sweet but she would feed us and then stand in corner and wait for us to finish. It was like she was serving us, but I felt that that's not why we're here, I mean I'm so grateful for the food and the food was good but also there's this separation that I'm not here to be served I'm here to learn and that was another time I felt like I was being a colonialist patriarchal person (Paula Interview 1/29)

Paula's discomfort with being "served" by a person in the community is part of a larger narrative of discomfort in experiencing the large wealth disparity prevalent in the world economy first-hand through voluntourism. Volunteers expressed their discomfort in encountering the power dynamics involved in partaking in voluntourism in Yaxunah because of the lack of a defined and purposeful role for volunteers and the uneven exchange of knowledge, resources, and money.

Despite the voluntourism industry's best efforts to create immersive experiences and lasting relationships, the voluntourist quickly learns they cannot become part of a community in a short weekend. One's own identity as a white, U.S. American, upper-middle class, privileged individual who has the opportunity to travel abroad while studying in college is put at the foreground in the voluntourism experience in Yaxunah, and in similar small-scale tourism projects in rural areas in Latin America. The visitor comes as an outsider into the community, only stays for a short amount of time, and often engages in "volunteer work" that has little visible impact. Despite being referred to as "volunteers," many visitors to the community whose primary purpose was to engage with the CCC's voluntourism project did not feel like volunteers. Because of the amount of separation they felt, visitors I spoke with often referred to themselves as "tourists," reflecting on their discomfort, surface-level interactions, and inability to make the kind of impact associated with volunteers. In being told they would have a place in this

community, one student in particular grappled with what exactly her role in this community would be, and what she would be doing there, if not making the sort of difference she felt could not be made in a three-day visit:

When we went to Yaxunah in particular, it was like ‘I’m a tourist but I feel like a colonialist because I am a white person coming down to watch the other people do something, so that’s when I also felt like a tourists even though I wasn’t shopping and doing the normal tourist things, I was going to see and I was going to look and I think that’s really interesting anthropological, looking and seeing and observing (Kara interview 1/29)

If the sole purpose of the trip was to watch, listen, and learn, this student felt uncomfortable with the title of volunteers, if her capacities and abilities to enact change were very limited by the nature of her trip. Voluntourism groups often tell volunteers that their mission in going to a new, poor, exotic place is to help the people. But when entering these communities, it becomes evident that these volunteers are from a very different place, and do not know enough about the local context to justify their methods of change. Encountering the other in voluntourism is often about an unspoken discomfort in the imagined identities of the visitor and the visited. Visitors’ identities and roles are challenges when volunteering and encountering this new place, because they come into close contact with their own privilege, incapacity to make change, and questioned role in the community.

A final major disconnect and sense of separation felt by volunteers was in the nature of the volunteer work itself. The labor-intensive portion of the voluntourism trip, the part in which local and foreign youth are able to work together on projects for the community, was also met with discomfort by past visitors to Yaxunah. At the CCC, volunteer work with visitors generally consists of construction projects, conservation work, or cleaning jobs. When I volunteered in Yaxunah in March 2015, I worked on digging and moving dirt from one place to another, painting a wooden board, and raking leaves, while others worked scrubbing walls, planting

plants in the garden, or moving rocks. These simple projects allowed both sides to understand the nature of the work, but were also very small-scale projects in which visible change and impact was difficult to gauge. With the visitor expectation and desire to “make a difference,” the nature of the volunteer work proved uncomfortable for some:

the work was relatively simple, the work itself I would argue was useless, how long will this step really last?... there’s a point where you’re just digging around a flinging dirt into the steps and compacting water on it and like, what the hell is that going to do? (Daniel Interview: 12/17)

my discomfort didn’t stem so much from being in a community in which I wasn’t familiar, I mean that was part of it, however I was discomforted by ...the project we were working, it on wasn’t rigorous and we only had a few days to ‘help’, I felt like I was just kind of standing around saying I was doing work but it wasn’t really helping anyone. And it took me awhile to come to terms with that, to come to terms with the fact that even just my presence there wasn’t helping anyone. (Paula interview: 1/29)

I don’t think there was a single bit of helping involved in that experience. I think it was all that we have to be ‘exposed’ to this certain lifestyle, like you’re not going to have your cellphone, you’re not going to have internet, you’re not going to have a bed, you’re going to sweat, you’re going to have a limited amount of clothing. And it’s all those limitations they mentioned to us and constantly pointed out to us. Like the whole point of the trip was for us to be exposed, there was no intention of a helpful exchange (Daniel Interview: 12/17)

Once again, here volunteers encounter their own roles while physically encountering another place and people. Despite expectations of helping and working with others, volunteers felt very separate from their peers from Yaxunah in meal spaces, homes, conversations, and at the CCC doing work. This discomfort thus became central to the experience of volunteering in the community for many, leading many to question the purpose of these voluntourism trips, if not to form close connections, make an impact, or see yourself as part of a “global humanity” where everyone can be comfortable. Because the voluntourism industry sells affective, transformative experiences and creates the expectation that volunteers will transform others and

themselves through their volunteer work, the volunteers' discomfort with their inability to "make a difference" prompted emotional responses, confusion, and reflection. While volunteers may want to change another person's life, they are in Yaxunah confronted with the reality that they themselves must learn from the community. Instead of leaving a community a new and transformed person, volunteers I spoke with left confused with their role and their inability to make the sort of impact they expected. When volunteers encountered Yaxunah, they entered by sharing physical space, but brought with them expectations and motivation fueled by a voluntourism industry interested in selling culture, affective experiences, and emotions that volunteers felt were ultimately unfulfilled.

YAXUNAH COMMUNITY ENCOUNTERS IN VOLUNTOURISM

While volunteers are experiencing this sort of exposure and emotional affect from their discomfort, the individual discomfort and moral challenges with participating in voluntourism are less apparent for those who live in Yaxunah, as their everyday lives are often intertwined with foreigners, who come and go in short amounts of time, and often do the same projects over and over. While outsiders may feel their individual contributions are problematic, uncomfortable, or challenging, their "trip" is to visit the daily lives of people living in a community, who see the constant stream of arrivals and departures as part of a broader narrative of tourists and travelers, and focus less on the individual.

Volunteers do not have a consistent presence in Yaxunah, but when they do come, their schedules are very calculated, their meals and activities planned out beforehand, and their swift entrance and exit takes place in the span of 2-3 days. This process is facilitated by the community and is an intentional act employed by Yaxunah community members to maintain their own autonomy and agency in the voluntourism industry, to continue living their own lives

without major interruption, and to perhaps protect against getting attached to fleeting and temporal volunteers. All visitors go through the same system, and often enter and leave the community with little individual impact on the community members. Community members noted little significance in individual names, groups, or projects, but rather a larger significance in the rotating presence of foreigners in the community. What is most interesting to my research is the long-term impact the presence of volunteers at the CCC has had on community members amidst the voluntourists' narratives about their volunteering experience in the community.

For tourists, voluntourism is a lot about the individual, feeling good, personally making an impact, and being exposed to another culture. But for Yaxunah, tourism has been much more of a daily experience, viewed as part of the economic sustainability and wellbeing of the community. Instead of experiencing exposure, newness, and the temporality of a volunteer trip, Yaxunah experiences volunteer tourism in a more daily, mundane, and choreographed way. Yaxunah community members expressed to me their town's recent adjustment to having travelers in the community as one that is both challenging with the more obvious barriers such as language and lifestyle, but also as an integral part to the town's current goals and incorporation in the tourism market. Now that rotating systems of accommodations and meals are in place and certain community members work at the CCC on a daily basis, the town has become more accustomed to having foreign travelers and volunteer tourists in the community. Working with volunteer tourists is thus not out of the ordinary and not the sort of transformative and emotional encounter that volunteer tourists experience. Yaxunah community members noted that they enjoyed learning about places outside of the Yucatán and working with volunteers on projects at the CCC, but were much less focused on the individuals they encountered and more interested in interactions with foreigners as a whole. Here I explore these experiences of daily encounter from

the perspective of Yaxunah community members and how it differs from the voluntourist expectation of transformation, affect, and exposure because of the community's values and position in the exchange.

Yaxunah's entire approach to the entrance into the tourism market in the early 1980s was based on the community and its efforts to further its own education, economic opportunities, and wellbeing through the promises of the tourism industry. Thus, encounters with voluntourists are more about what the tourists mean for the community as a whole and over a longer period of time. The CCC prioritizes this community-based model by rotating hosting responsibilities and resources and bringing tourists through in a calculated manner that is less focused on individual transformation and forming relationships with foreigners. This sort of encounter I refer to as "daily" because it manifests itself as a mundane, regular, routine exchange of conversations, spaces, and, in the end, currency.

To refer to interactions with tourists as daily and routine in Yaxunah, I do not imply that tourists are looked down upon or ignored, but in fact the interactions with tourists have and continue to allow Yaxunah community members to learn from others and expand their own ways of organizing the community. Outside contact also brings attention to the community and has created opportunities in education, the job market, and to earn an added source of income.

According to Jorge Tomás,

The CCC has allowed us to have more contact with other places and people, meaning there are more people checking up on us and more people knowing how we are doing and what we need as a community. We are more well-known than some of the surrounding communities due to the CCC. (Jorge Tomás Interview: 1/18)

The impact of voluntourism on the community is in part due to the contact it allows with outsiders, foreigners, and the agencies that connect these tourists to the community, such as

workers in transportation, tour companies, or the nearby Chichen Itzá archeological site. These encounters have contributed to how the community views itself and the rest of the world, but more importantly has allowed for Yaxunah to expand opportunities in the community, instead of just for the benefit of travelers. Thus, according to those in Yaxunah, visitors serve to draw attention to the community to allow the town to develop on its own terms. Instead of individually “helping” or “volunteering,” the presence of visitors as a whole has made an impact, as Nora describes here:

I believe change began with the founding of the CCC in 2010. With the CCC, there were more visitors in the community, which inspired the adults and kids to change their values and see more opportunities. The presence of visitors showed children, especially girls, that they can be independent, educated, and see more places in the world. With this, many kids in the community are now inspired to go to school, get jobs, and see places outside of the community. Within the community, there has also been a lot of change. Values that stated women should stay in the home, never leaving or receiving education, are changing as the opportunities for education are growing and we can see positive benefits from education. Women used to be beaten for leaving the home, going to school, or trying to go anywhere without permission, but with the presence of visitors and the increased access to education here in the community, this practice is no longer very common.

When visitors come to the community, the kids are inspired to continue with their education, despite what their older relatives who still hold older values may say. With seeing young adults doing with their lives that are not solely getting married and having children, the youth of the community have started to strive for a different future as well. More and more girls are waiting until they are much older to get married, and even more are waiting longer to have children, opting to further their education first. (Nora Interview 1/15)

The CCC has increased the number of foreigners in the community, and thus impacted how the community views itself and the outside world because of the community-based perspective with which the CCC perceives their involvement in voluntourism. Instead of becoming invested in the individuals they encounter or striving for the sort of intimate relationships voluntourists may expect, encounter is much more of a calculated, community-based, and economically-driven experience for Yaxunah residents. Volunteer tourism in Yaxunah has made a longer-term impact

on the community and has opened up opportunities for education, jobs, and increased communication with the surrounding communities.

The encounter for Yaxunah community members is about the community and its continuation, rather than the individual interactions with volunteer tourists. During my time in the community, I noticed a sense of separation with which Yaxunah community members viewed their own lives and the lives of those that visit. Because volunteer stays are so frequent and temporary, Yaxunah community members note they do not become attached to individuals who visit, whereas visitors note remembering exactly with whom they interacted and how each person impacted their experience in the town. As visitors are having this experience of “exposure” and “immersion,” Yaxunah community members are simply living their daily lives. In a strategy that could perhaps be for protection, Yaxunah community members noted a detachment from creating the sort of intimate relationships volunteers expect to form. These differing perspectives of encountering the other are well exemplified by this journal entry I wrote upon my arrival in January 2016. Although I had visited the town before, nobody, not even the family with which I stayed for two nights, remembered my group or me.

It's interesting to actually see whether we were remembered or made an impact, because I was able to return nine months later. What I've learned is that as an individual, and in the individual projects I worked on, my work and time in Yaxunah was just a blink in time; just one weekend and just two days on projects that are more meaningful as part of the larger townwide project of the CCC and having a visitor presence. Individually we grew, but our impact on the town was not exactly what we had been led to believe. Our experience in the town was a way to meet and be exposed to people from another place, exchange money, and feel a sense of purpose as volunteers in the 'rural Yucatecan Maya community'. The red paint that dots my hiking boots from last March is from the day we spent painting two wooden shelves to create a space for cleaning equipment and supplies. Now, one of the shelves is in place on the wall, and the other lies against a wall on the backside of the building that houses the restrooms. It lies unused and mixed with other discarded materials, out of sight of anyone passing through the usual locations visitors enter. The area my group spent several hours raking, clearing, and digging holes in is now covered by a large new storage garage type

building. And of course leaves cover the areas we raked, as we knew they would the day after we said our goodbyes. The pond group's work must have been continued by other volunteers, as it is looking more complete but does not have anything living inside of it. When groups of visitors come through, volunteers from Yaxunah add water to the pond. The walls that one group spent a day washing look ready for another group to come in and do the same.

When I talk about how I've been to Yaxunah before, nobody remembers the group of twelve that came for one weekend in March of last year. No one remembered my name or face, or the fact that I stayed with the family who I had breakfast with this morning and had no recollection of my time in their home. Even Elias, who was our leader for the weekend, only knew me because of our e-mail exchanges throughout the fall, but was unsure what I looked like when we planned to meet up in Mérida last week. Our presence then was fleeting, our individual contributions insignificant, but the organization as a whole and our presence as volunteers has significantly changed how the community interacts with the rest of the world." (Fieldnotes 1/16)

Yaxunah community members expressed minimal emotional investment in the experience of encounter with volunteer tourists. Because tourists come through the community almost every weekend, detaching from the individuals they encounter may serve to ensure Yaxunah community members do not have to experience the sadness or confusion involved in a consistent stream of arrivals and departures. As individuals, visitors are forgotten quickly, as their presence in the community is fleeting and not very significant in the daily lives of members of the community. While foreigners may be interested in forming lasting connections or immersing themselves in the environment, Yaxunah community members are simply interested in living their lives and furthering their community's goals, with volunteers and visitors providing a source of income and a connection to the outside world.

This connection has also caused residents in Yaxunah to reimagine their identities, connections to Maya culture, and knowledge of future opportunities. The presence of volunteers in the town has prompted a transformation in how residents, especially youth, see themselves in comparison to the rest of the world. As a community continuously labeled as "Maya" by both tourism discourse and elders in the community, Yaxunah community members noted a pride in

their self-identification as Maya, but also noted that this identity label is less popular among youth. In nearby cities, Maya last names and origin are often regarded as lower-class or with a negative connotation (Loewe 2007: 292), thus many who have had opportunities to leave the community for school or work have returned with a transformed perception of their community's identity. Involvement in the tourism sector has increased Maya culture pride for some, such as Jorge Tomás, but continues to be an obstacle for youth, who are both the future of the community and have more opportunities than ever to leave (Jorge Tomás Interview: 1/19).

Thus in Yaxunah, voluntourism has had a transformative impact over time and as a whole. It has transformed Yaxunah's economy, opportunities for education and work, and perceptions of self and identity. The town's economy has shifted from being entirely based on agriculture to incorporating a stream of income from tourism endeavors at the CCC through homestays and meals with families, fees for entering the cenote, and volunteer contributions and work. This additional income is put back into projects for the community, namely improvements to the CCC, resources for community-wide classes and celebrations, and salaries for those who work at the CCC and live in Yaxunah. In terms of education, Yaxunah has seen a shift from a single elementary school to a system of education from age two to fifteen, followed by high school in a nearby town. There are now systems of transportation for students to get to the nearby high school, and even to study at nearby universities in Valladolid, Peto, and Mérida during the weekdays and come back to the communities on weekends and holidays. Lastly, the communities concept of identity has shifted in different ways for various groups in the community. When asked about their relationship to the term "Maya," some members of the community noted their pride in their association with Chichen Itzá and the pre-Columbian Maya civilizations. Young adults who have the opportunity to leave the community for school or work

may not fully associate or connect with the term “Maya” beyond the language of Yucatec Maya that is spoken in homes, but elders including Jorge Tomás, hope that upon their return to Yaxunah to raise their families, they will learn to take pride in their Maya connection. Individual contributions of volunteer work may seem insignificant and fleeting in the overall shifts in Yaxunah, yet they all contribute to the impact of the total foreign presence, which has been transformative as a whole. Voluntourism is transformative in Yaxunah, but not in the ways volunteers may desire, as their individual projects may seem insignificant and thus prompt discomfort and questioning. The significance of the volunteer work thus lies in a larger project, that of a decades-long initiative to incorporate the community into the tourism market while still striving to maintain a sense of community on Yaxunah’s own terms.

The voluntourism encounter, while anticipated as an ethical way to travel and create intimate and lasting relationships, ends up creating affective experiences filled with discomfort, detachment, and questioning among voluntourists, instead of the satisfaction and selflessness they may have expected to experience. Voluntourism creates affective and emotional experiences in which participants from each side of the encounter have vested interest and impact from the interaction, yet the ways in which each side experiences these encounters and their emotional investment differ drastically. Voluntourists who spend time in Yaxunah were found to experience discomfort as the primary emotion, and thus began to question their purpose and goals, their role in the exchange, and their ability to “help.”

In Yaxunah, community members expressed the daily and routine encounter of having voluntourists and foreigners in the community as less of an affective and emotional experience, but rather more of a way to interact with people from a different part of the world, make additional income, and take part in a calculated exchange of meals, accommodations, and

volunteer work. Volunteer tourism thus creates an experience that differs from its major selling points of “making a difference” and forming intimate relationships in the community. It indeed creates transformative and affective experiences, but in ways in which volunteers may not expect.

CONCLUSIONS

I do not seek to claim here that Yaxunah's experience is emblematic of all voluntourism projects in the Yucatán Peninsula. The Yaxunah case represents one experience of encountering the Other through the lens of volunteer tourism. In interacting with a host community, volunteers encounter not only new people and a new environment, but also experience affective and emotional discomfort. Volunteers in Yaxunah confront their own role as volunteers, their previous expectations, and their felt separation between themselves and those they are seeking to connect with and "help". By creating an environment of discomfort for volunteers, voluntourism with the CCC in Yaxunah is indeed a transformative and affective experience, but in ways that volunteers may not have anticipated. When volunteers experience discomfort with their own role, the role of the community they are "helping," and the concept of voluntourism work as a whole, they are in fact reimagining the ways in which people encounter one another. Volunteers who come to Yaxunah for a weekend cannot in fact make the sort of difference or impact they had been made to believe was possible. But their time in Yaxunah was not wasted, as this realization of volunteers' position in a global hierarchy, inability to make lasting change, and inability to form lasting relationships allows volunteers to reimagine the goals and expectations of voluntourism. Voluntourism is indeed a way to expose volunteers to a new environment and way of life, but comes alongside the emotional and visceral experience of discomfort that causes volunteers to question their preconceived notions about volunteering, poverty, the Maya, and exchange.

After spending time in Yaxunah, volunteers reimagine their conceptions of what it means to volunteer and participate in voluntourism projects. Lily's discomfort with her presence in Yaxunah as a foreign, white, United States resident stemmed from her encounter with her own

lack of knowledge and false expectations about the community. While not all volunteers who leave Yaxunah come home questioning the power structures and hierarchies in place that are reinforced through voluntourism, Lily's recognition of her unmet expectation to "make a difference" proved transformative in her interview after returning home. Because the expectation to "help" was not met through the visible and concrete manner that volunteers may have anticipated, the notions of what constitutes volunteer work shift. Volunteers are still playing a role in the community, even if this role is merely to learn more about others and themselves, instead of making individual significant changes.

Secondly, volunteers' perceptions of the Maya as an impoverished people or civilization "stuck in time" shift during stays in Yaxunah. While this is a space for future research and inquiry, the ways in which the Maya are framed as poor and incapable societies in need of help from volunteer groups influences how tourists enter rural tourism in the Yucatán region. Common perceptions of poverty associated with hunger, resource scarcity, and suffering do not hold true in volunteers' experiences in Yaxunah, where visitors are met with smiles, families who are able to offer full meals to volunteers, and a strong sense of community pride. Volunteers felt discomfort in their inability to create the sort of visible change they were expecting to make because they worked on projects of *bienestar*, (community well-being), instead of more traditional development projects. While larger issues associated with a lack of access to internet, a full running water system, and emergency health care are present in Yaxunah, they are not at the forefront of the volunteer experience and thus have the potential to transform how volunteers view the rural Yucatán and the purpose of voluntourism.

Lastly, discomfort in the voluntourism encounter transforms how volunteers confront exchange in Yaxunah, especially in terms of the monetary exchange they must confront. While

volunteers may expect to make close connections with members of the host community that transcend cultural and language barriers, they are met with a different reality. Yaxunah community members wishing to continue living their daily lives intentionally keep a certain degree of separation between themselves and visitors to protect themselves against emotional attachment that can be detrimental in a constant stream of arrivals and departures. Instead of forming close, intimate relationships with host communities, volunteers instead find themselves engaging in a different sort of encounter, one that is a calculated interaction and ultimately a form of income for the host community.

Exchange is indeed about interacting and learning from one another, but also includes an element that causes much discomfort among volunteers, the monetary component. Volunteer stays in Yaxunah are ultimately a source of income generation for families who participate in the CCC and its systems of accommodations and serving of meals. Although the volunteer presence has had a variety of impacts on the community, one of the most prominent has been the influx of money generated from bringing in tourists to see the CCC and its museum or to participate in longer voluntourism projects. Currency exchange creates discomfort for volunteers, as the act of giving money to their host can be awkward and cause volunteers to confront their own privilege and power. This form of encounter is an area for future research and is telling about how the voluntourism industry works to craft experiences of affect and emotion outside of power structures in an attempt to avoid addressing these global power systems. When volunteers must pay their host families, they are forced to confront the sort of power hierarchies they may be uncomfortable acknowledging. While volunteers may expect their work or conversations to make the difference they desire, their monetary transactions are making a difference for families

in the community, thus transforming the ways in which volunteers view their own purpose and role in Yaxunah.

Transformation for volunteers in Yaxunah manifests in the reimagining of expectations, the purpose of volunteer work, and the image of rural Yucatán. This new perspective is valuable in that it challenges the notion that volunteers are capable of creating lasting change and impact from short-term visits with little background knowledge on the host community. Discomfort emerges in recognizing that volunteers do not know it all, and that the systems of power in place that create the circumstances for voluntourism are much more complicated than the voluntourism industry presents. Voluntourism encounters in Yaxunah allow volunteers to reimagine their ability to create change through very fleeting visits, and challenge them to confront the fact that the community is more knowledgeable about its own development than the foreigners coming to visit and help.

Voluntourism also allows host communities to experience valuable transformation and exposure to new people and new perspectives, but with a longer-term and community-centered focus. While volunteers experience personal discomfort and a transformation of perspective, Yaxunah community members have seen their town transform economically, socially, and educationally over the past two decades. The community of Yaxunah has worked within and beyond the voluntourism industry's commodification of the Maya by taking advantage of this opportunity to open their doors to volunteers and foreigners while also claiming agency and autonomy over their own project. Yaxunah's ownership over their voluntourism project prioritizes community, and thus creates an environment in which tourists are a second priority. While individuals from Yaxunah may view their interactions with volunteers as calculated and mundane or as part of a weekly routine, they still play a vital role in the CCC's continuation as a

community-based project and the town's relation to the tourism market. Tourists here cannot make the sort of significant impact, visible change, or intimate relationships they may have envisioned. Voluntourism is thus transformed into an encounter that creates opportunity, instead of the economic and cultural losses seen by other communities in the region (Fernandez Repetto 2014: 12). Yaxunah's focus on community wellbeing keeps the focus on the town and its residents and only adds visitors to the mix as a form of extra income and as a way to gain additional recognition in the region.

Conceptions of identity in Yaxunah have also shifted as a result of the entrance into the voluntourism industry. In an industry where the Maya is painted as impoverished and mysterious, Yaxunah residents are working to transform this image both for members of their own community and for tourists. As previously mentioned, pride in Maya identity has decreased as the youth who travel outside of the community to continue their schooling learn about the negative connotations that Maya surnames hold in larger cities such as Mérida. Outside of Yaxunah as well are representations of the Maya as connected to sacrifice, brutal wars, and theories of an apocalypse, exoticizing the Maya by relating the entire ethnic group with one myth of its culture and history. When volunteers come to Yaxunah, they are shown a different sort of Maya that allows their perceptions of the term to transform. The community has the ability to change these perceptions of what it means to be Maya, as they are in charge of their own voluntourism project and manage the schedules of tourists and volunteers. Transformations in the perception of what it means to be Maya in the 21st century in Yaxunah begin in the CCC cultural museum, where exhibits in Maya, Spanish, and English display the town's history, celebrations, wildlife, traditions, and the importance of the Maya identity for the community. Yaxunah elders like Jorge Tomás hope to promote pride in the Maya identity, as a label

continuously being transformed, that connects current members to a multigenerational community.

Voluntourism and cultural tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula allow volunteers and host communities to reimagine their connections to each other and to the world around them by creating affective and transformative experiences. In Yaxunah, these experiences manifest in an experience of discomfort for volunteers that ultimately allows them to transform their perceptions about voluntourism and the Maya community in which they spend their time. For Yaxunah residents, participation in the voluntourism industry has created opportunities for transformation of the economy, education system, and perceptions of community identity. Through both of these processes, the encounter in Yaxunah is valuable and significant in that it allows both volunteers and community members to reimagine the ways in which the voluntourism industry in the Yucatán sells affect, experience, Maya culture, and exchange.

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ⁱ All names mentioned from Yaxunah and of volunteers are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the individuals.

ⁱⁱ All translations to interview excerpts and articles in Spanish are written by the author.