Going the distance: Endurance philanthropy, spectacle, and development in Central America

Abstract

The increasing popularity of fusing adventure, humanitarianism, and travel has received attention from scholars within the fields of leisure and tourism studies, particularly regarding widespread activities such as volunteer tourism. Fewer have examined the phenomenon that we refer to as endurance philanthropy, in which participants journey long distances under challenging conditions to increase awareness and raise funds for specific causes. As more and more people become attuned to the idea, it is essential to interrogate the power dynamics and development discourses that frame such campaigns. To begin this necessary conversation, this paper investigates one subset of the endurance philanthropy movement: participants who have journeyed from North America to Central America to raise money and awareness for causes situated within the destination region. Using the lenses of spectacle and critical development, we analyze online media produced both by and about these journeyers. Our findings highlight key themes that weave across and through these events: actions not words, expedition completed, grit and determination, and donor commitment. We argue that these events – while emphasizing solidarity and advocating for social change – ultimately undermine the potential for such transformation due to the spectacular, individualizing, and apolitical characteristics of the campaigns. This results in the reproduction of neoliberal self-help models of progress, which reinforce the status quo and downplay larger structural issues that keep poverty and inequality in place.

Keywords: adventure, endurance, philanthropy, humanitarian tourism, spectacle, development, Central America

Introduction

Adventure philanthropy blends travel, altruism, volunteerism, fundraising, hedonism, and adventure (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). Such activities are on the rise as alternative fundraising opportunities for charitable organizations eager 'to engage communities, attract donations, and publicize the charity's activities' (Coghlan & Filo, 2013, p. 123; Palmer, 2021). This increasing popularity has received attention from scholars within the fields of leisure and tourism studies, particularly regarding widespread activities such as volunteer tourism (Butcher & Smith, 2015; Ingram, 2011; Sin, et al., 2015). Fewer have examined the phenomenon that we refer to as endurance philanthropy, in which participants journey long distances under challenging

conditions to increase awareness and raise funds for specific causes.[1] Thus, while adventure can be an element of endurance philanthropy, the focus of these journeys is on enduring over a set distance, often emphasizing the chosen mode of transportation (such as bicycle, kayak, or horse). The rise of such events raises questions as to the power dynamics and development discourses that undergird their campaigns. While not framed as 'development' per se, the overall impetus of such activities is decidedly developmentalist as funds are directed towards projects meant to improve the livelihoods of subjects who are located in the Global South.

While scholars from various disciplines have broached the topic of development, from a critical development perspective primary arguments include its use as a tool for depoliticization (Ferguson, 1994) and the imbalanced power dynamics which allow development to be deployed as a mechanism for maintaining power over populations (Escobar, 1995). Moreover, the framework of spectacle, which draws on Guy Debord's (1967/2009) work emphasizes the ways in which social relations have become commodified and mediated by images in the contemporary era. In the spectacular society, the unjust status quo is obscured and consumption replaces action. Debord's society of spectacle framework allows us to further critical development approaches in that it highlights the mechanisms through which popular development narratives are internalized by actors wanting to 'make a difference,' but in ways that ultimately reproduce the existing state of affairs (see Authors, 2019). Although these two bodies of literature share many underlying assumptions, they have rarely been put into conversation with one another. This paper offers a corrective to this lacuna and argues that, together, they offer a productive way to analyze endurance philanthropy campaigns.

In particular, we investigate one subset of the endurance philanthropy movement: participants whose journeys encompass routes from North America to Central America aimed at raising money and awareness for causes situated within the destination region. Central America has long attracted visitors traveling under the banners of adventure and altruism. Colonial era exploration and civilizing missions have transmogrified into adventure tourism promotions (Daly, 2013). The region's striking landscapes of volcanoes, rainforests, and beaches collide with its legacies of poverty and violence, enticing intrepid visitors to travel 'with a purpose.' This

[1] Others refer to similar activities as charity challenges or philanthropic endurance events, in this paper we refer to them as endurance philanthropy.

study employs discourse analysis of the materials produced by and about five of these events, along with the online materials of the organizations for which funds were raised. Through close reading and an iterative thematic coding of documents, blogs, videos, social media posts, and images, we identified key themes that weave across and through them: actions not words, expedition completed, grit and determination, and donor commitment.

While dovetailing with concerns about broader development projects, in this paper we investigate the particular phenomenon of endurance philanthropy, drawing on the frameworks of spectacle and critical development theory. We highlight how these events – while emphasizing solidarity and advocating for social change – ultimately undermine the potential for such transformation due to the spectacular, individualizing, and apolitical characteristics of the campaigns. This results in the reproduction of neoliberal self-help models of progress, which reinforce the status quo and downplay larger structural issues that keep poverty and inequality in place.

Background literature

Critical development, discourse, and adventure philanthropy

As scholars from a variety of fields began to interrogate the projects and processes which frame the enterprise known as 'development,' many drew from postcolonial and poststructural theorists such as Foucault and Said to critique development's discursive side. Discourses, which 'are made up of ideas, ideologies, narratives, texts, institutions and individual and collective practices' (Lawson, 2007, pp. 30-31), shape the way we think about the world. The elevation of certain discourses to the realm of 'commonsense' is a power-laden enterprise. In the case of development discourses, the conflation of capitalist economic growth with success has circumscribed common conceptions of not only development practices and processes, but also of the subjects of development. Escobar (1995) traces the historical production of subjects of development in mainstream development literature, finding, "a veritable underdeveloped subjectivity endowed with features such as powerlessness, passivity, poverty, and ignorance, usually dark and lacking in historical agency, as if waiting for the white (Western) hand to help subjects along" (p. 8). It is important to recognize that 'development' practices are diverse and many have changed in response to the critiques of development throughout the years. Nevertheless, the insights of Escobar are still visible in popular development discourse.

As such, many critical development scholars examine development discourse to interrogate the motivations and power dynamics underlying the representation, implementation, and evaluation of development. Critics of this emphasis on discourse contend that it comes at the expense of attending to the real, material needs of people (Blaikie, 2000; Peet & Hartwick, 2015). Yet the consequences of reinforcing unjust structures in society, which are engendered by normalizing discourses, are very material.

Depoliticization is one of the major critiques launched at development projects. Ferguson (1994) argues that 'by promising technical solutions to the sufferings of powerless and oppressed people, the hegemonic problematic of "development" is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politicized in the world today' (p. 256). This often goes hand-in-glove with external intervention, wherein outside experts identify problems to be resolved via external assistance, a holdover from colonial power dynamics (Mitchell, 2002).

In Central America, as in much of the world, in the neoliberal era the responsibility for 'development' or 'improvement' has increasingly been shifted to the individual in the manner of 'self-help' or 'self-development' projects (Hale, 2002; McAllister & Nelson, 2013). As Hale (2002) explains, 'the neoliberal state unloads onto its neoliberal citizen-subjects the responsibility to resolve the problems – whether daily or epochal – in which they are immersed' (p. 496). NGOs play an important role in this process. In what has been referred to as the NGO-ization of the post-war era, NGOs have taken on many of the responsibilities of the state (McAllister & Nelson, 2013, p. 33). As participants in NGO development projects internalize discourses of self-help and improvement, 'development' becomes the primary path for overcoming obstacles.

While endurance philanthropy has been less studied, similar critical development arguments have been made about adventure philanthropy more broadly, notably in regards to volunteer tourism. As Wickens (2011) describes, volunteer tourism is either celebrated as a constructive project in which volunteers help communities in developing countries or it is criticized as a colonialist endeavor which commodifies difference (see also Everingham and Motta, 2022). Keeping in line with the neoliberal development paradigm, the responsibility for 'development' is placed on individuals (Butcher & Smith, 2015; Sin et al., 2015), with solutions for development issues arising from the Global North (Vodopivec and Jaffe, 2011; Ingram, 2011).

Further, Mostafanezhad (2014) has extended the well-known 'tourist gaze' to the conceptualization of the 'popular humanitarian gaze' by revealing how such activities work to naturalize inequality and fetishize the underlying 'commodity mediated relationship in ways that limit more radical political action' (p. 117). Apolitical approaches to profoundly political issues foreground the experience of the volunteers, rather than producing improvements in livelihoods. As such, Vrasti (2013) argues that the utility of volunteer tourism is not to be found in the actual material development of targeted communities and projects, but rather in its production and reproduction of 'the subjects and social relations neoliberalism requires' (p. i). These critical arguments move us beyond questions of the efficacy of these types of activities and highlight the adverse consequences they may ultimately house.

Spectacle, development, and adventure philanthropy

The second theoretical framework we employ to understand the contradictions and implications of these endurance philanthropy events is that of the spectacle. Debord theorized that the essence of modern society is the spectacle, such that 'life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles' (1967/2009, p. 24). That spectacle has become *integrated* into society in both *concentrated* and *diffuse* forms, serves to inspire everyone to 'act and speak *as if they* are the spokesmen [sic] for the spectacle' (Jenkins, 2009, p. 16, emphasis in original). Indeed, it is argued that spectacle is a necessary condition of adventure philanthropy, as an audience is required in order to reach the set goals (Authors, 2019).

While Debord was writing in the 1960s, his theses on spectacle are ever-more relevant in the contemporary era, with the expansion of social media, smart phones, and the like. As these technologies and new media become increasingly intertwined with the enterprise of development (Schwittay, 2015), a Debordian approach to development lends us key tools to flesh out the mythologies and pathologies that reconcile those eager to 'make change' into reinforcers of the status quo.

Scholars have utilized the lens of spectacle to examine various forms of philanthropy, including celebrity humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2012; Kapoor, 2013; Lim & Moufahim, 2015). Chouliaraki (2012) highlights the dependence of humanitarianism on spectacle, arguing it foregrounds pity over justice. Kapoor (2013) similarly critiques the depoliticized nature of celebrity humanitarianism, noting, '[w]hen charity work turns principally on spectacle and show,

the tendency is to valorize dramatic stories and moral arguments, sound-bytes and photogenic images, and quick and short-term solutions, often at the expense of a broad, complex, and long-term politics' (p. 115). In their investigation of celebrities performing extreme challenges to fundraise for charity, Lim and Moufahim (2015) argue that the 'spectacularization of suffering,' of these events draws attention to 'the spectacle image itself rather than on the charities these spectacles espouse' (p. 525).

Another way in which spectacle and critical development dovetail is that each critiques the elevation of the 'individual' in society. Debord (1967/2009) argued the spectacle society reinforces the isolation process, creating 'the lonely crowd' of 'isolated individuals.' Linhart (2006, p. 456) describes this as the spectator recognizing that he or she is in need of meaning and yet cannot find it in the midst of a spectacle culture. While philanthropic tourism seems to contradict the ideologies of individualism, it remains an opportunity for self-image enhancement and expression of individual values (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Coghlan & Filo, 2013). This is akin to what Chouliaraki (2013) has labeled 'ironic solidarity' in which 'the publics of solidarity…are today called to enact solidarity as an individualist project of contingent values and consumerist activisms' (p. 15). Further, spectacularization, as Lim and Moufahim (2015) note, 'offers an aura of wholeness' (p. 529), through which it reconciles the disjointed separateness of life via images of unity.

Such is the paradox of spectacular philanthropy events. In the process of going to extreme measures to express solidarity, non-conformity, and engagement with a cause, '[t]he consumer society *qua* society of the spectacle induce[s] conformity, depoliticization, and passivity by relentlessly attempting to hijack any viable notion of critical engagement and resistance' (Giroux, 2007, p. 26). In this paper we highlight the contours of these processes in the context of five endurance philanthropy journeys from North America to Central America.

Methods and Central American contexts

Geographic context: Central America

Relative proximity and the geographic contiguity of North and Central America have established conditions which have sustained legacies of interconnection. After the region gained independence, North American adventurers, explorers, and surveyors descended, later producing

travel accounts that were widely popular in the U.S. (Espey, 2005; Taracena Arriola, 2019). Framing Central America as being in 'the backyard' of the U.S. has been used to legitimize U.S. actions which have marked the region for well over a hundred years, including neocolonial economic, political, and military interventions. The violent 20th century civil wars in countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua were, in part, linked to the U.S.' Cold War-era agenda. As the violence from these wars apexed in the 1970s and 1980s, a burgeoning Central American solidarity movement in the U.S emerged. This movement brought together activists, refugees, and exiles (with a large degree of church involvement), to speak out against U.S. intervention. Thousands traveled to the region as delegations in the 1980s, organized by groups like Witness for Peace (Fox, 2012). As Grosser (2020) notes, '[t]he relative ease, geographically and culturally, of travel to Central America…made personal witness to the struggles in the region a common experience for solidarity activists' (para. 11).

The decades of conflict culminated with peace accords in places such as El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1990s. While violence did not end with the signing of accords (and in many places increased), the accords ushered in neoliberal reforms. Government support for public services retracted and NGOs proliferated throughout the region to fill the void. Also, during this time, tourism was promoted to advance national economies (Cañada, 2010). In many instances the individuals and associations involved in the Central American solidarity movement of the 1980s transformed from their revolutionary and political roots into NGO-based international volunteer projects (Borland, 2013; Todd, 2021).

Inequality and poverty remain high throughout the region, particularly in areas where Indigenous populations reside, such as in Guatemala (World Bank, 2020). As such, when Central America receives popular attention, it is often either framed as a region in crisis (the 'migration crisis' being a recent example), or, paradoxically, as a compelling tourist destination. Ecotourism, volcanic landscapes, beaches, and cultural diversity animate the imagined geographies of Central America, in tandem with poverty, violence, and natural disasters. Such imagined geographies elide the diverse historical, demographic, and geographic realities of the region. Yet, they provide an important backdrop for humanitarian tourism endeavors, which have a relatively long-standing (and increasing) presence within Central America (Adams & Borland, 2013). Such context is vital for understanding and interpreting endurance philanthropy journeys to the region.

Methods

On the contemporary fundraising scene, endurance philanthropy events have become ubiquitous. They take place around the world, and some do not even involve travel or adventure. The spectrum ranges from enduring in one's own garden (such as 99-year-old Captain Tom Moore's 2020 campaign to raise money for the British health care system by walking 100 laps in his garden during the COVID-19 pandemic) to traveling around the world in a challenging way for a particular cause. While this ubiquity is an important background for our arguments, in this paper we focus on Central American causes with associated events that include travel to the region. Limiting the research in this way allows reflection on the geopolitical context of poverty specific to Central America, including the shared legacy that many countries in the region have of being impacted by US sponsored destabilization and violence. We examine how this context is represented in the spectacle produced by and about endurance philanthropy events and the role of travel in producing this spectacle.

A broad range of events were identified utilizing an internet search. We narrowed this to focus only on cases of long-distance, caused-based adventurers with journeys that set off from North America to raise funds and awareness for causes based in Central America (see Table 1). This eliminated those events which are committed to causes in Central America but occur solely within the region (such as cycling across Nicaragua) as well as those involving endurance-based journeys but not to the region itself (such as kayaking the Mississippi River, walking across Eurasia, or completing virtual events in one's home, which became increasingly popular during the pandemic).[2] After identifying the list of five events which met our criteria, we collected materials produced by and about each of these events, including online materials of the NGOs for which funds were raised. While the extent of document types varied for each event, they generally included news articles, blog posts, social media posts, videos, and photographs. We then discursively analyzed these materials, using the lenses of Debord's theory of the spectacle and critical development scholarship.

<Table 1 About Here - Summary information for selected endurance challenges from North America to Central America>.

[2] There is also the question of defining the distance at which an event becomes an 'endurance' event. For the sake of focus, we opted to not include shorter charity challenges, such as ten-kilometer events or half-marathons, which frequently occur both within the region and elsewhere.

In Rose's (2016) work on discourse analysis, she references Debord's description of the 'society of the spectacle' to emphasize the integration of 'the visual' into contemporary 'social life' (p. 4). Following this, the approach to the discourse analysis of the online materials we collected is informed by Rose's (2016) framework of analyzing four sites of reference: production, the image itself, its circulation, and the site where the image encounters it spectators and audience. In this way, Foucauldian-informed approaches to discourse analysis – integral to critical development scholarship – are bolstered by Rose's visual emphasis. Rose notes that the distinction between these sites is not always clearcut and, further, that attending to each in equal depth is beyond the scope of most studies. However, her framework provides an important conceptual approach to visual materials in discourse analyses of the development enterprise in the online era. Drawing together these approaches, the first author familiarized herself with the collected data, reading and re-reading the materials, transcribing video content, and identifying potential patterns. After this initial step, the materials were manually coded in an iterative fashion to generate and consolidate themes. In collaboration with the second author, the authors ultimately identified four key themes: actions not words, expedition completed, grit and determination, and donor commitment.

Going the distance: results and discussion

Actions not words

A common theme that arises throughout the narratives produced by and about these journeyers is how they are motivated by a need to make a difference. For many of the participants, these journeys represent a concrete, actionable event. As one cyclist, whose journey raised $12,000 for a health clinic noted, 'These are the kinds of trips that change people. They actually make a difference…. We need to…embrace action more than…words.' Similarly, a cyclist from a different trip reflects, 'the thing I am most proud of is that we have followed through on what we said. We have translated words into action....' An important strata of the change-making narratives, therefore, is that development issues in Central America are presented as being solvable through donations and awareness coming from a distance. Thus, the idea of making a difference is employed at multiple scales, such that in some cases, the causal relationship between donations/awareness and end-results is not explicitly outlined.

For example, the horse rider, who rode from Ontario, Canada, to Guatemala, remarks in his blog, 'The result of your donation…will be an increase in family well being, prosperity, and health, for Guatemalans and citizens of the entire world.' While this particular organization repurposes donated bicycles, the majority of the cases we studied focused on educational programs. Educational programs that are supported by NGOs are often situated in ways that hew towards apolitical approaches towards solving development issues (Brehm & Silova, 2019). As such, they also are attractive to those wanting to 'make change' in a concrete, simple, quantifiable manner.

The kayaker, who was raising awareness and money for an organization working with children and families who make a living scavenging at a garbage dump in Guatemala City, describes her motivations for the trip and how learning can lead to a better future:

> I listened to the mothers talk about their wish that their children could just go to school, learn to read, and have a better future. That simple dream just broke my heart. So, I knew I had to do something to help.

Yet, the challenges facing impoverished communities in Central America are often too complex to be sustainably resolved by simple actions. Nevertheless, development issues are often presented in simplified, resolvable ways to publics in the Global North, or what Simpson (2004) and others have referred to as the 'public face of development.' Such representations depoliticize inequalities and injustices, and present issues in a largely technocratic fashion.

However, the representations and reflections do – at times – hint at the larger structural issues which undergird global inequality and poverty. As one cyclist discussed in his blog entry about his travels in Guatemala:

> The past few days had frustrated me. An uncomfortable feeling churning away in the pit of my stomach that progressively grew as our travels continued. No, I hadnt (sic) eaten a bad taco, it was a frustration born of realisation - a realisation that there was no quick fix to the very real problems that faced the country we had very quickly fallen in love with.

He goes on to discuss race, inequality, and discrimination facing Indigenous inhabitants in Guatemala, concluding:

> The problems the country faces may be solved by a sense of moral and social duty but alas, greed had prevailed amd (sic) it was up to nongovernmental organizations…to compensate for this most grotesque of sins.

The NGO for which the pair of cyclists was fundraising was a children's charity, and their project was primarily aimed at raising money for the construction of additional classrooms in a village. So, although there is recognition of larger structural, political, multi-scalar issues at play, the way in which to address these remains largely non-governmental and apolitical.

In his discussion of the spectacle of the celebrity humanitarianism, Kapoor (2013) highlights how celebrities come to represent and speak for the 'Excluded,' resulting in 'the construction of voiceless and passive victims' (p. 115). Endurance philanthropists do not present themselves as solving complex societal problems, but rather as doing something in the face of larger issues. However, the 'action' to be done then becomes the endurance feat itself, rather than addressing the challenges facing Central Americans. In these examples, we also see a naturalized acceptance of the role of NGOs in tackling problems in region, instead of the State (McAllister & Nelson, 2013, p. 33, Hale, 2002). There is not a demand nor an expectation that the State will provide access to things such as education. The depoliticization ensconced in the 'neoliberal logics of NGO-ization' (McAllister & Nelson, 2013, p. 37) limits the transformative potential of the actions sought by the endurance philanthropists. Further, there is a sense that the problems faced in Central America are bounded within the region, eliding the transnational, global linkages which underlie issues such as inequality and poverty.

Expedition completed!

While many of the endurance philanthropists faced serious setbacks, each endurance challenge was ultimately deemed a success by the adventurers. Further, the elements of disruption along the way enhanced the endurance theme and offered opportunities to reinforce motivations and inspirations. One woman, who was hit by a car and hospitalized on what was to be the final day of her journey, outlined her determination to cycle the remaining part and meet her original goals:

> Thank you all for your continued support, this accident may be a minor set back but I am still determined to pedal the last little stretch…Let's do ALL that we can to make sure these people get the learning opportunities they so deserve.

Similarly, emergency surgery interrupted the kayaker after kayaking 1500 of the 2500 miles. This led her to complete her journey in a disjointed fashion, traveling part of the way by car and then eventually to Guatemala by sailboat. However, the pre-set 2500-mile kayaking goal was

elevated in her blogs as a benchmark equating success and drawing parallels to her cause. Therefore, the expedition was relaunched several months later to achieve the goal, ultimately completing the trip in Key West, not Guatemala. She reflects on her motivation during these events:

> Time to contemplate why I keep going despite obstacles: spinal surgery, rough weather, damaged kayak, injured wrist, exhausted body. It's really very simple. I have before me the images of the children and parents at [the organization]. Their obstacles are much greater than any I face… But thanks to [the organization], they are breaking out of that cycle. They are doing it with persistence and determination and hard work. So the least I can do as I travel down the coast sharing their stories is to demonstrate, in just a small way, a little of that persistence.

This quote also reflects a common motif from these journeys – that of framing the event as analogous or parallel to overcoming the challenges faced by the Central Americans for whom they are raising money and awareness. Like the theme of actions not words, the implication is that the successful completion of each journey is equivalent to a resolution of the complex issues faced by Central Americans living in poverty. Although, this sense of completion was uneven among the cases we examined. For example, the cyclist to Nicaragua notes that while the goal of $7000 was reached on the same day as her arrival at her destination, 'I may not be on the road anymore but the journey isn't over until the learning center is up and functional.' Nevertheless, the end point is envisioned as a completed learning center, through which lives will be improved. However, as with many of the examples examined in this paper, the information about the progress of the learning center stops after the cyclist's journey. In this sense, the narrative journey is over once the endurance feat is complete.

Rather than following any change invoked by their endurance and others' charitable support, these representations of adventure events more often end at the point of arrival, highlighting instead the adventurers' experiences, goals, and accomplishments. This valorization of dramatic stories over the more complex structural and political elements resonates with Kapoor's (2013) writings on celebrity humanitarianism. With the celebritization of endurance philanthropists along their journey, the struggles they encounter along the way form a key element in drawing followers and donors. Yet, this 'spectacularization of suffering' (Lim & Moufahim, 2015), misdirects attention and disguises the limits of such engagement.

Grit and determination

While most of the narratives focus on the adventurers' unique experiences, self-reflections, and improvisations, when Central Americans are represented they are vignettes of success stories – who have advanced by following the respective NGO's guidelines. Perhaps in a bid to evade the long-standing development critique of paternalism and dependence, many of the endurance journey narratives emphasize the self-sufficiency of the beneficiaries with references to '[raising] themselves out of poverty' and descriptions of projects as being 'a hand-up, not a hand-out.' Further, there is an emphasis on how 'deserving' recipients are, particularly as they demonstrate initiative and hard work to overcome their circumstances.

One cyclist described, 'The beneficiaries of this ride are a small, but very deserving group of people who have no one else to speak for them.' And as the kayaker was quoted in an interview, 'In many places where I travel around the world, I see people with their hand out…Here, I see people doing everything they can to make their own lives and their children's lives better.' Depictions of some impoverished people as being more deserving than others is consistent with neoliberal, individualistic approaches which elide larger structural components and causes and obscure the interrelated nature of global inequality. In this view, the successful interventions that NGOs and others can make to respond to inequities require imparting qualities of self-sufficiency in target communities. This aspect of NGO involvement is notable in the following quote from one of the cyclists:

> We were able to interview some of the children, who had been selected by their peers to be representatives of the school, and spoke to us ingenuously about their aspirations for the future; aspirations that seemed to have been instilled by some of the excellent projects already undertaken by [the NGO] over the past few years.

There is a performative element of having some children inspirationally discuss their plans for the future, as representatives not only of the community, but also of the effectiveness of the NGO's interventions. The question, however, is to whom the performance is being delivered (see also Wearing et al., 2018). In the instances of these endurance journeys, the audience is composed of those in the Global North, who follow the journey and narrative and in many cases are looking to invest in causes in which demonstrable change can be made, a topic to which we turn in the following section.

Additionally, discourses of grit and determination are presented as the foil to the 'veritable underdeveloped subjectivity' previously outlined by Escobar (1995, p. 8). Yet, rather than serving as a departure from the standard discourses, this juxtaposition highlights the assumption that without development programs, the Central American development subject would remain 'illiterate, needy, and oppressed by its own stubbornness, lack of initiative, and traditions' (Escobar, 1995, p. 8). Further, the individualism and self-sufficiency underpinning the discourses of grit and determination ultimately do not question the root causes of poverty. By placing the means for getting out of poverty on changes made by individuals, the larger socio-political structures in which they are enmeshed remain unchanged.

Donor commitment

The portrayal of 'deserving' recipients who are demonstrably able to 'pull themselves out of poverty,' and the emphasis on the resolvability of the issues faced in the region, are important factors for attracting not only awareness and followers of the journeys, but also donors. Indeed, the spectacular nature of these trips is, in part, driven by the need to generate interest and donations to the cause. Observers are assured that 'Your donation can make a difference!' and they thus become part of the adventure. The confluence of these narratives can be seen in the kayaker's video invitation to join her cause:

> Please join in helping the children of the garbage dump. Their parents are working so hard and doing everything that they can, so that their children can have a better life. With just a little help from us, the [the organization's] children will have hope for a brighter future and an opportunity to achieve their dreams. Join me!

While supporters did occasionally accompany her on the journey, in the majority of the cases support was envisioned as following their social media, spreading the word, and donating money. As one cyclist urgently outlines in her blog, 'I may be alone on the road, but I AM NOT and CAN NOT be alone on this mission. I NEED your continued support. More importantly the people […] NEED YOUR SUPPORT.'

And from the group of four cyclists:

> So please tell your neighbours and your friends to check us out and to become involved. And remember, all you have to do is go to our "Please Donate" page to donate online…and be the change you wish to see in the world.

As these quotes emphasize, not only can the adventurer make a difference, but so too can the donor. Although not unique to endurance humanitarian fundraising events, the narratives produced by and about these trips are very powerful forms of creating affective investments among donors and followers (Schwittay, 2015).

Part of the adventure journeys, therefore, is the challenge of generating support, not only for the causes in Central America, but also for the journeys/ers in and of themselves. This task is not without frustration, as observers may be drawn more to the spectacle of the endurance adventure, and less to the cause itself. This was notable in blog entries of the horse rider, such as the following, "Americans were far more generous to me than expected. And far less interested in the [organization's] project than expected." Aside from these frustrations, a more common theme throughout the materials produced by and about the journeyers is that of gratitude. From the perspective of the journeyers, they often express their thankfulness for the support of their followers, noting they could not complete these endurance feats without them, as illustrated in the following quotes:

> Throughout the trip, during moments of exhaustion, weakness and frustration, I think of the huge number of people who have supported us and wished us well. […] It really keeps us going when bums are sore!

> It is days like these when I need every one's help and support the most. Sometimes when nothing is going right and I am continually having set backs it becomes hard to remember why I am doing this and how important it is that I continue on my journey. But it is that (sic) comments, donations, general support, and the kind hearts of strangers that remind me that what I am doing IS worthwhile…

And from the perspective of the supporters and followers of the events, this gratitude is often framed as admiration for the heroism of the journeyers. Notes such as 'You are an inspiration that we can all be the face of change' highlight the impact these journeys have on their audiences. As one social media commenter explained, 'You guys are all my heroes!! Keep up the amazing work, and remember the ripple effect of inspiration you are having on the world...'

Debord theorized that in modern society authentic social life has been replaced by its representation: 'Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation' (1967/2009,

p. 24). In this vein, the representations of endurance philanthropy offer not a better understanding of the causes of poverty and inequality in Central America, but instead adventure stories about those who are travelling. The symbiotic relationship between travelers and donors, in which praise and gratitude are reciprocally exchanged, prioritizes the challenges of the endurance event and has little to do with the challenges faced by Central Americans.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, it is also in this way that these cases are illustrative of Debord's notions of 'the lonely crowd' (1967/2009, p. 32). The ways that encounters and gratitude are expressed in these journeys suggest that these adventurers and observers alike are attempting to break out of the isolating effects of the society of spectacle, demonstrating that authentic experiences and genuine encounters are possible. Yet, this message is communicated via imagery, which Debord would argue only perpetuates the 'lonely crowd' of spectators – it unites the separated, but it unites them 'only *in their separateness*' (1967/2009, p. 32). As such, the competition between the self-sufficient inclinations of neoliberal individualism and the humanitarian impulses of solidarity can merely be resolved at a cosmetic level in an endurance philanthropy campaign (Lim & Moufahim, 2015).

Conclusion

Examining these endurance philanthropy events, each aimed at charitable causes in Central America, has revealed multiple ways in which the discourse about these events depoliticizes the causes and context of poverty in the region, produces needy (yet deserving) subjects, and promotes individualized, self-help approaches towards personal achievement. Such mechanisms can be found in discourse related to various forms of adventure philanthropy. However, the format of the endurance philanthropy challenge also demands a spectacularization of suffering (Lim & Moufahim, 2015) in order to draw an audience. In this paper we have highlighted how it is the spectacle of individualistic self-sacrifice, alongside development narratives of success, which supplants the enduring nature of the challenges that exist in the region.

The journeys highlighted here are presented as analogous to mainstream approaches to development that envision linear progress and transformation to reach an endpoint at which 'development' is achieved. While critical development scholars critique this viewpoint, it still underlies the logic of mainstream modernist development projects throughout the world, and

moreover, shapes many popular imaginaries of what development is and does. In this way, these endurance philanthropy events follow a similar arc, as participants are motivated to endure pain in solidarity with Central Americans, for which there is a destination to reach after which they can return to comfort, having completed their goals. Yet, development does not have an end point. Those 'in need' remain so and must, necessarily, inspiring the next endurance philanthropist.

As this type of fundraising is becoming more popular, it is vital to unpack the ways in which it simultaneously appears to be a radical act of solidarity yet further normalizes an unjust, neoliberal status quo. Drawing together spectacle with critical development studies offers a novel and productive way to understand the public face of development (Simpson, 2004; Smith & Yanacopulos, 2004) created and reinforced by such events. By highlighting the emergence of the themes of actions not words, expedition completed, grit and determination, and donor commitment in the narratives surrounding endurance philanthropy journeys, we can see how participants have internalized the dominant discourses of development which critical development scholars have long denounced. Yet, Debord's society of spectacle is a necessary supplement that exposes the inherent contradictions of popular conceptions of 'doing development' (Simpson, 2004). More and more people are drawn towards activities which engage with this particular public face of development, problematically assuaging the need for people to push for deeper action. Therefore, it is increasingly important to destabilize it in an effort to work towards a more equitable and just society.

Participants position themselves as embarking on radical feats of solidarity and invite all to take part and 'join in' on the journey, portraying individualistic activity as collective action. Yet there is an absence of voices from the region, in tandem with the lack of longer-term approaches toward collectively addressing issues such as poverty, inequality and injustice. Rather, in these events, the confluence of spectacle and mainstream development discourse enshrined in endurance philanthropy campaigns serves to obfuscate and reinforce the deeper structural issues which reproduce existing power dynamics, firmly keeping poverty, inequality and injustice in place. The lonely crowd of isolated individuals remains, locked evermore into individual achievement ideologies. Yet, the veneer of solidarity has placated the impetus to act, fortifying an apolitical passivity. As such, well-meaning efforts ultimately undermine, rather than facilitate, the potential for greater social justice and solidarity.

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Table Captions

Table 1: Summary information for selected endurance challenges from North America to Central America