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An Autobiographic Exploration of Resistance to Development Aid

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Journeys in Aidland: An Autobiographic Exploration of Resistance to Development Aid

*Ermina Martini and Marjaana Jauhola**

Abstract: The article is inspired by autobiographical and auto-ethnographic approaches to studying international relations, development and humanitarian aid.¹ It consists of a collage of the authors' personal experiences in two post-disaster contexts, respectively in Aceh, Indonesia and Haiti, and presents a dialogue between two autobiographical stories that reveal the shared experiences and emotional labour of the humanitarian aid practice. Addressing questions such as "What does it mean to feel like an outsider?"; "Outsider to what?"; "Is being an outsider a failure or a strategy of resistance?" This article circulates around the themes of mobility, temporality, intersections of class, gender and 'whiteness', and how they are embedded within the materiality and spatiality of humanitarian aid. Feelings of separation and discomfort point towards an opening for critical discussion on the ways in which these practices are both maintained and resisted. Although considered as an important vehicle for the care of the self, the authors struggle to offer any easy solutions, recognising their privilege of confession, and the risk of becoming trapped in the familiar circulation of truths of the Global North.

Introduction

Haiti and the province of Aceh in Indonesia were hit by the most destructive disasters of recent history. The Indian Ocean tsunami and the earthquake in 2004 resulted in over 120,000 deaths and displaced over 700,000 people in Indonesia,² with estimated damages totalling \$4.5 billion.³ The death toll in Haiti is contested but the latest figures indicate between 112,000 and 65,000 casualties; altogether three million people were affected in some way by the quake, causing \$8

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¹ See for example, Naeem Inayatullah, ed., *Autobiographical International Relations. I, IR* (New York: Routledge, 2011); David Mosse, ed., *Adventures in Aidland: The Anthropology of Professionals in International Development* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013); Anne-Meike Fechter and Heather Hindman, eds., *Inside the Everyday Lives of Development Workers: The Challenges and Futures of Aidland* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2011).

² Marjaana Jauhola, *Post-Tsunami Reconstruction in Indonesia: Negotiating Normativity Through Gender Mainstreaming Initiatives in Aceh*, (London: Routledge, 2013).

³ Caroline Brassard, "Measuring aid governance in developing countries: an application to post-tsunami Aceh, Indonesia," *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 75:4, 2009, 629-648.

billion in damages.⁴ In both cases, the destruction was followed by astonishing charity from all over the world. The humanitarian aid machine deployed its organizations very quickly and soon both Haiti and Indonesia were flooded by foreign aid workers, who, in the majority of cases, had never been there before. We were amongst them.

We are two European women, of different nationalities (a Finn and an Italian) but with similar social, economic and racial backgrounds. We have working experience in several post-disaster and development aid contexts in South and South-East Asia, the Western Balkans, West and Central Africa and Central America. The purpose of this article is to look back retrospectively at our humanitarian experiences, narrating a journey through the circles of Aidland.⁵ Our self-reflection could be located in a trend in development studies that draws analytical attention to the “social and cultural lives of global professionals, their class position, biographies, commitments and anxieties”.⁶ We produce first person accounts of the micro politics of our own expert practice.⁷

Aid practitioners and experts, it is argued, although diverse, “occupy cultural enclaves of shared consumption, lifestyle and values”.⁸ This social basis, also referred to as ‘islands’ or ‘bubbles’⁹ is said to be part and parcel of the enabling infrastructure necessary for ‘travelling rationalities’, transferable knowledge skills, and context-free ideas with universal applicability.¹⁰ It forms an essential component of harmonizing aid policies.¹¹ However, such lifestyles also form an intimate part of the individual struggles aiming to make sense of the short-term contracts, shifting contexts, organizations, and people.¹² It is also argued that everyday lives of development workers is part and parcel of the theory of development and produces new avenues for re-examining the processes of development.¹³ With an analytic eye on the everyday, it opens up the possibility of focusing on the experiential and the affective side of development: what does it do to us, and how it moves us emotionally and physically.

This article is a product of an experimental methodology combining reflexive memory and life-history method, creative writing, and auto-ethnography.¹⁴ In early 2013, after an informal

⁴ Mats Lundahl, *The Political Economy of Disaster: Destitution, Plunder and Earthquake in Haiti* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁵ By ‘Aidland’ we refer to the world of international development and humanitarianism, which is concretized in policy-making realms, aid project sites, and the virtual world of aid professionals. The concept was initially used by Raymond Apthorpe in “Coda: With Alice in Aidland: A Seriously Satirical Allegory,” in David Mosse ed., 199-219.

⁶ David Mosse, “Introduction: The Anthropology of Expertise and Professionals in International Development,” in Mosse ed., *Adventures*, 1-31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18; Heather Hindman and Anne-Meike Fechter, “Introduction,” in Fechter and Hindman, 2, 8.

⁸ Mosse, “Introduction,” 14.

⁹ Ritu Verma, “Intercultural Encounters, Colonial Continuities and Contemporary Disconnects in Rural Aid: An Ethnography of Development Practitioners in Madagascar,” in Fechter and Hindman, 72.

¹⁰ Mosse, 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14, 5; see also Rosalind Eyben, “The Sociality of International Aid and Policy Convergence,” in Mosse, ed., 140.

¹² Hindman and Fechter, 14; Verma, 72.

¹³ Hindman and Fechter, 3.

¹⁴ David Lewis “Tidy Concepts, Messy Lives: Defining Tensions in the Domestic and Overseas Careers of U.K. Non-Governmental Professionals,” in Mosse, ed., *Adventures*, 177-197; Anne-Meike Fechter “Anybody at Home? The Inhabitants of Aidland,” in Fechter and Hindman, 131-149; see also Mosse ed., *Adventures*; Norman K. Denzin, “Analytic Autoethnography, or Déjà Vu all Over Again,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35:4, 2006, 419-428.

discussion on our experiences as aid workers and researchers (a side product of a more formal PhD supervision meeting) we realized that our memories were worth further elaboration. Encouraged by the existing literature on autobiographical and auto-ethnographic approaches to international relations¹⁵ we decided to write our stories. First separately and then after reading each other's stories, jointly. To our surprise we discovered that our tales were intimately interwoven and shaped around the structures and practices of Aidland. We then collaged the texts in a fluid flow of different images and memories. The process also included an extensive open discussion that took place informally and spontaneously, a re-elaboration of our memories, challenged by the images brought up by each other's stories. The emotional labour of doing aid was at the core of our writing process. Emotions, such as frustration, unease, disillusion, and helplessness became our main data set, in line with Humble's¹⁶ observation that emotions are not only recognizable in the research process, but are themselves a form of data. Finally, the conclusion was built by explaining how we felt in reading the other's story and by reflecting on the possible follow-up steps after the initial sharing. The first version of the article was presented at the Second Nordic Conference for Development Research in Espoo, Finland, in November 2013 where a seminar room packed with people had gathered to listen, watch, and reflect upon the experiences that many shared. After two days of academic papers and debates, revisiting the affective sites of development with the help of material anchors such as photographs and items selected from the 'aid wardrobe', also broke the routines of academic conferencing. Valuable comments and questions led us to revisit academic textual materials that became part of the 'academic fabric' of the article.¹⁷

We adopted Pearson's concept of 'mystory':¹⁸ 'mystory' combines three kinds of discourse: personal, popular and expert:

The author identifies with the object of study, acknowledging affiliations and bias, and this drives the research: whilst conventional academic practice is clearly present, it is infused with personal observations and sources of lay knowledge. The method is emotional, self-reflexive and revelatory.¹⁹

The innovative element of this article stands in the interconnection of two individual 'mystories' narrating pieces of experiences, belonging to different settings, years, disasters, but with the potential of being read within a shared flow of thoughts. Both tales built on the perspective of white university trained middle-class women in their twenties and thirties taking a 'class trip' to Aidland in the Global South.²⁰ Using a combination of writing and reflective discussions, but also adding a performative element at the conference, allowed us to think of academic knowledge production processes differently: how do we communicate our work and to whom? We intentionally broke normalized practices of conference behaviour by focusing on our personal emotions while doing aid. Using verbal, visual and haptic perception via the circulation of clothes around the seminar room we challenged the participants to engage with the topic and share their

¹⁵ See Naeem Inayatullah, *Autobiographical International Relations*.

¹⁶ Darryl Humble, "This isn't getting easier: Valuing emotion in development research," *Emotion, Space and Society* 5, 2012, 78-85.

¹⁷ We wish to thank Annelie Schlaug, Jeremy Gould, Juhani Koponen, and Minna Hakkarainen for their valuable comments and questions.

¹⁸ Mike Pearsons, *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape*. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Pearsons, quoted in Inayatullah, 4.

²⁰ Mosse ed., *Adventures in Aidland*.

own experiences.

Our feelings of separation and unease expressed in the following pages are part of the emotional labour of aid.²¹ The feeling of being an outsider and the efforts of resistance to Aidland's practices underpin both our stories. We argue that such moments of discomfort and awkwardness are essential for destabilising the seemingly natural and depoliticized Aidland. Finally, this collaborative writing could be seen as a form self-care/analysis: a joint attempt to try to make sense of the struggle, and make sense of oneself that is troubled.²²

Marjaana: My Aceh Story – how to tell it?

I initially aimed to reflect upon my five-month experience as an aid worker in 2006 in Aceh as part of a post-tsunami reconstruction programme of one international non-governmental organisation. But those experiences formed an intimate part of a wider reflection process that had led me to step away from humanitarian aid job markets. Experiences that I usually summarize as 'troubling' I have learned over the past years to appreciate as a resource, rather than embarrassment, or normalized as 'this is how things are'. However, having set myself a task to write about 'my Aceh experience' I felt uneasy that I was treating my memories, encounters and experiences in/on Aceh in isolation – isolation from my educational background, my past work experiences, and my family history that emerges from the intersections of the Finnish welfare state, gender, class, and geopolitics. Thus instead, I have written this reflective piece on Aceh alongside reading my journal entries and photo archives over the 15 years spent in Germany, Finland, India and Indonesia (1996-2013). As narratives of the past often tell us more about the present, I can sense a feeling of ambivalence, desire and the need to make sense, but also to understand my decisions in life and how I have become who I am.

I see it as a story of a university trained middle-class woman in her twenties, thirties, and forties taking a 'class trip' to Aidland in the Global South²³ in the context of globalizing job markets and neo-liberal individualism: I am trying to find a niche, seeking a promise of employability, suffering the agony of maintaining a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, but also critically reflecting on all this. So primarily, these pages will try to verbalize the uneasiness, the trouble, that is manifested through material practices and embodied experiences that produce what I call the 'expatriate aid class': Rest and Recuperation holidays (R&R), matching shoes and bags, Sunday brunches, clothes marked with laundry initials (MJ) and the expectations of how (humanitarian) aid experts should behave and how to position and locate their bodies on the disaster maps and events.

I come from a non-academic middle-class family: my mother is a retired occupational nurse from a rural farmer/merchant family in Central Finland and my father is a retired electrical engineer from a primary school teacher and head of school family in a small town in Northern Finland. My childhood was filled with middle-class signifiers and symptoms: classes in piano and violin, moving to a special music class from the second year of primary school, and moving to a neighbourhood where my friends' fathers were managers and white-collar employees, and their

²¹ Hindman and Fechter, 2-3, 7, 11.

²² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self, Vol 3*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1986]) 42; see also Mosse, 22; Verma, 71.

²³ See Mosse.

mothers were working – or so I assume. My parents met while studying in the same town. Later, when they graduated from college, my mum’s career and employment depended on where my father’s work took the family. My father’s career was in the paper and pulp industry, or ‘process industry’, which is its own trip into a globalized Finnish economy. His college-trained factory engineer to sales manager and entrepreneur career materialized to me as a small girl as chocolate, DIY videos, and souvenir dolls from his frequent travels to Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, and South Africa. Compared with the other Nordic and European countries, the number of migrants in Finland in the 1980’s was extremely low. Thus, those souvenirs constructed an Orient on our living room bookshelf and sparked my desire to learn about the ‘exotic other’, cultural and racial differences - and become part of ‘the world’. Coming from a small wood industry town in provincial Finland felt isolated and boring. Besides my father’s travels, our family never travelled abroad, unlike other members of the middle class, or many of my development studies students today, for whom backpacking and volunteering is the norm.²⁴ My first trips as an adult outside the Nordic countries was when I was working for a development aid consultant company as a newly graduated MA student.

I also belong to the first generation in my extended family who gained a university degree. This means that the feelings of a ‘class’ outsider follows me wherever I go: initially at the university and the abstract world of theories and thinkers,²⁵ and later in the aid circles of Helsinki (the Ministry, the NGOs, the consultant companies). But it also meant communicating this newly emerging world of possibilities back to my family, who at the time of my university entrance exams was trying to imagine ‘what exactly does a sociologist do for a living’? It is striking to realise that when I wrote my journals in my undergraduate years, I had a strong desire and wish to become an aid expert, someone who is taken seriously and whose experiences and skills matter. Whereas most of my peers would combine sociology with social policy or political science, I was excited to explore cultural anthropology and development studies. My undergraduate years in the early 1990s also collided with a close-knit collaboration between the scholarly community and the Finnish development machinery. I even attended a diploma programme entitled “Towards International Professionalism” that was in line with the government’s formal foreign policy strategy of increasing ‘Finnish visibility’ at the UN through the Junior Professional Officer funding – all aiming to increase the number of Finns working for the UN, international financial institutions and development agencies. In particular, the events organised around the 4th UN Conference on Women in Beijing fuelled my motivation: working on women’s rights and the promotion of gender equality seemed an ideal career. The decision to aim for an ‘international career’ was a combination of curiosity towards the exotic other and a wish to ‘do good’, but also my own rebellion against the gender norms of my family, my way of saying: girls/women can do it, too! Thus, increasing career opportunities for university-educated women to promote women’s rights in the Global South is in an interesting intersection of Finnish gender equality policy, the foreign policy paradigm shift after the end of the Cold War that actively constructed Finland as part of the civilized West and differentiation from the Soviet/Russia, and strengthening transnational ‘UN feminism’ and unexplored histories of Orientalism and colonialism.

In my diary entries I am yearning to make meaning and to make a difference to global politics and

²⁴ See also Wanda Vradi, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

²⁵ Kaisa Koskinen, “Kuinka minusta tuli akateeminen tietotyöläinen?” *Translation Studies* 4, 2009 (Accessed 28 October, 2013). <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/hes-eng/volumes/volume-2014-the-road-to-translation-polkuja-kaantamiseen>.

people's lives, and yet, I am simultaneously trying to balance these expectations against feelings of lack, the frustration of not finding job security or clarity of purpose in my career. I was repeating in a way the same question that my family had posed for me a decade earlier: what will you become? Today, that strong desire is turned upside down and instead, I realize that I have a strong urge to question and trouble such desires. I want to think of how to trouble knowing and de-politicized acts of 'expertise' and consider what effects emerge when one actively aims to fail to become an aid expert.²⁶ I want to examine this at the level of work ethics, but also how one positions oneself critically in the globalized forms of social status and class hierarchies.

Marjaana: The wardrobe 2001/2013



Image 1: Hand-sewn hem of the silk scarf. Photo: Marjaana Jauhola

“Glorious career, impressive lifestyle” screamed the advertisement at the roundabout in a diplomatic neighbourhood of Chanakyapuri in New Delhi, portraying the Indian Air Force as a dreamlike career for Indians. I open the black storage box and go through its contents: one blue sleeveless long dress, one black sleeveless velvet long dress, two chiffon salwar kameez, one long silk skirt, one big silk scarf, one pair of high heel shoes, and a photo of me in my UNDP office in New Delhi taken during my two year Junior Professional Officer contract between 1999 and 2001. Within the photo is a framed photo on the table of my two nieces and me in front of my grandparents' house in a village in Central Finland's lake region. I am wearing one of the chiffon salwar kameez, my nieces wear bamboo hats that my father had bought on one of his business trips to Asia. The computerized date at the back of the photo says January 2001. I remember storing these clothes a few years ago with an idea of writing about the materiality of aid expertise, and now the time seemed ripe for it.

²⁶ Jauhola, *Post-Tsunami*, 173-5.

While touching and feeling the soft fabrics with my fingers, I try to locate the specific stories of these clothes. I remember buying the orange coloured and Kashmiri ornamented silk fabric on the week my partner and I had arrived in New Delhi in October 1999. He worked with Nokia and his Finnish expatriate colleagues took us to an expensive shop where I chose this fabric and wanted to have a big rectangular scarf made of it. I look at the scarf more carefully: its hem has been neatly hand-sewn by someone. The colours of the scarf are still vibrant and the stitching still seems new. For most of my clothes, I would not be able to locate the exact time nor place where they were bought, but looking at the map of New Delhi I know they are either from Hauz Khas, South Extension (I & II), Khan Market, or Shantushti Shopping Complex. Anyone familiar with the consumerist maps of New Delhi would know that these were, at least around the millennium, parts of the metropolis that would attract economically well-off Indians and the expatriate community to consume, consume, and consume. And that's what I did with my closest friends. In fact, it was our weekend hobby: drive (or be driven if the Nokia driver was on duty) from one shopping area to the other, and return home exhausted, the car full of clothes, bags, and shoes. 'Matching bags and shoes' was the slogan my best friend and I used to describe it. Thus, the Indian Air Force advertisement was not only speaking to wannabe AF recruits, but it was, and still is, talking to me.

When did I wear this scarf last? I don't remember. Two sleeveless dresses take me back to the numerous house parties that I attended with my new friends who all were young professionals, foreigners, or Indians, either working for UN agencies, bilateral development agencies, or embassies. I never wore these dresses after leaving India in 2001, in part because I would no longer fit into them (they are that slim!), but also, because I no longer go to such house parties that resemble official diplomatic cocktail parties. I now look at the photo again, focusing on the figure of myself. I have short hair, no makeup, and I am wearing a blue long-sleeved cotton shirt and white cotton trousers. Where are those clothes now? Did I bring or ship them back to Europe in 2001? Or were they part of the donation I made to the HIV/AIDS care home just before departing? I have no recollection. Yet, these simpler, more mundane clothes dominate my current wardrobe. They are easy to use: no need for ironing, no worry about extra weight or widening hips.

The differences between the clothes in the box and in the photo are drastic. The fabrics point out a social and economic difference (cotton vs. silk, velvet, and chiffon), but they also form and construct my own understanding of my gender identity: high-heels, fabrics and their lines of cut and stitching expressing hyper femininity; whereas the simple cotton dress, combined with short hair and no make up is more ambiguous and androgynous. This is how I also remember those two years in India, it was a constant negotiation between consumerist hyper-femininity and my former 'me' that had resisted the dominant norms of 'being' or 'becoming' a woman for years. What is striking to realize is that what I had earlier categorised as solely a struggle against gender codes now – roughly a decade later – appears to me also as a struggle against social and economic status in a diplomat-dominated cohort of aid circles. These are the materialized aspects of becoming a gendered expert. Struggling over the question of 'power dressing', however, follows me also as a researcher. Today, I enter the spheres of diplomacy and elite policy making as a researcher and the pressures on university researchers to have a societal impact have meant that I find chiffon, ironed shirts and woollen trousers in my wardrobe for meetings that take place at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs or the Parliament.

Ermina: My Haiti Story-part one. The pool. 2010.

The first time I went to Haiti it was eight months after the devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010. I can still recall the exact moment when I was informed of the tragedy: it was around 6pm

and I was at the airport in Mexico City, at the boarding gate of my return flight to Finland. I had spent the festivities with my partner and his Mexican family and his mum phoned. After she watched the breaking news on TV she told us what had happened in the nearby unfortunate, small country. Soon, astonished travellers started to gather around the TV screens in the airport's halls, watching the first reports from a destroyed Port-au-Prince. The commodification of the tragedy, the fear, and the horror were immediate through the extensive coverage. Media, especially images, are the primary means for the public to become aware of distant others' suffering, sustaining the creation of global compassion.²⁷ There is only a one-hour time difference between Mexico City and Haiti and I was geographically very close to the disaster, but I was heading in a completely different direction. After returning to Helsinki, where I was living in 2009-2010, I went to work in the Democratic Republic of Congo for an international NGO. Managing projects for NGOs is/was my profession. I was seventeen when I first left Italy and I spent seven months in a remote little town in Australia. Since then, I was driven by a desire to explore, to travel the world; I am still struggling to understand what was at the heart of my desire. Probably it is something that started unconsciously, nourished by a local environment that I felt, at that time, too narrow, conservative and boring. My family never travelled outside Italy, my parents did not speak foreign languages and we never really talked about countries in the South and their problems, which made them even more appealing and exotic. I studied International Relations, followed by a Masters in Human Rights and Peacekeeping and I entered the job market through an international volunteering program in Burkina Faso. I climbed all the required steps in order to become an aid worker; in my native language I used to call myself *cooperante*,²⁸ but I currently refrain from using this term, as I believe it is misleading. With a hint of cynicism I would now affirm that we are deployed in the South not to cooperate, but to be bureaucrats and apply the donors' rules.²⁹

It was the summer of 2010 when I decided to accept a job offer in Port-au-Prince. I considered the offer appealing for the same reasons I would now hesitate to accept it: a good salary and benefits package; the novelty of the context of deployment; and the amplitude of the relief efforts involving actors from all over the world. Upon my arrival I was fetched from the airport and driven in a big vehicle of the organization to the upper side of the city, to the rich neighbourhood of Pétionville. I was thrilled because I was parachuted into one of the poorest and badly affected countries in the world and I was so naïve to think I could do something good for its immediate recovery. Besides my excitement at being there, I only remember the traffic jam and the kindness of the driver. I was taken to the NGO's rented guest-house and asked to choose a bedroom. Soon, I was in shock: not by the tents of the displaced Haitians or the collapsed buildings, as at that stage I had not seen any of them. I was shocked by the luxury of the villa where I was lodged. A two storey house, with six bedrooms, five bathrooms, huge living room, kitchen, three terraces, one with a gym, swimming pool, and with everything fully furnished and decorated. I could see the incredible view over Port-au-Prince, including the harbour and the airport in the distance. I could hear the noise of that broken city, rising up to the hillside area where the houses of the rich were better built and remained standing when the ground shook underneath, killing thousands of people. The owner of our house was a Haitian *grimo*,³⁰ who decided after the earthquake to leave the country and move to Miami, the most popular nearby destination of the Haitian diaspora.

²⁷ Birgitta Höijer, "The Discourse of Global Compassion: The Audience and Media Reporting of Human Suffering," *Media, Culture and Society*, 26:4, 2004, 513-531.

²⁸ The literal English translation is *cooperator*, but the closest term used in current English would be *aid-worker*.

²⁹ Leslie Christine Groves and Rachel Barbara Hinton, eds., *Inclusive Aid: changing power and relationships in International Aid*. (London: Earthscan, 2004).

³⁰ In Haitian Creole slang, it identifies a light skinned black man, usually belonging to the upper class.

Indeed, renting his property to an International NGO was great business because, thanks to the arrival of many humanitarian organizations, the local rents increased tremendously. In the guest-house I was welcomed by two lovely old black ladies, sisters, who were in charge of the property. The owner asked the NGO to keep them, as they had lived in the house and worked for his family for a very long time. I never understood if they had any other proper place to go. I was also told that one of the ladies specialized in cooking and the other in cleaning. At the beginning I could hardly communicate with them as they only spoke Haitian Creole, and I spoke French. I later realized that they were probably the closest I came to the life of the local poor during the months of my first stay in Haiti. They were living in some back rooms of the house, where the kitchen and laundry were located and they were sharing the space with the guards. There was a door separating our side of the guest-house from their side. When I crossed that door in order to check the washing machine, I saw the conditions in which they were living: small, shabby rooms, with one shared latrine in the yard where our clothes were dried and ironed and our meals were prepared. That door meant the segregation of two worlds with opposite levels of power. Previously that door separated two different layers of the Haitian society, the mestizo economic elites and the marginalized African descendants - *moun andeyo*.³¹ In Haitian Creole there is an interesting term people use to indicate these layers; instead of using *social class* they prefer the word *kouch*, which comes from the French *couches*, meaning a deep stratification of groups belonging to different levels of the social ladder. With the earthquake, a new layer was added (actually it already previously existed) in the local context: the foreign aid workers, to which I belonged.

My experience during those months consisted of living on one side of that door, in the NGO's little world, made of cluster meetings, reports, and project proposals. I committed to work as hard as I could to help the people on the other side, the final beneficiaries of our projects. But increasingly, I realized that even if I was an expert in filling templates, monitoring budgets and managing resources, I knew almost nothing of the culture, the history, the social structure of Haiti. And even worse, I started realizing that little help was going to come from our side of the door to support or change the life of the people on that other side: only a small percentage of the funds pledged for the recovery was translated into the implementation of activities. All the rest was absorbed by the complex aid machine – a black hole – with spillover effects on service providers owned by the local elites and foreign companies.

I don't remember the moment when I started to feel like an outsider in the aid circle of which I was supposed to be member. But I remember some symptoms of my malaise, of my resistance in accepting the boundaries of the circle. I started to object to my new colleagues at dinnertime when they made generalizations about Haiti and Haitians; I started to detest the conversation when it moved to discussions of the best destinations for R&R, or where to get a massage or find handsome gym teachers. I never wanted to go to any wild expat parties and when a party was held in the house I searched for an alternative place to stay. I tried to push the use of French as the working language because I thought using English was disrespectful to the locals. Then one day I was astonished to hear that a colleague from another organization had introduced herself to the local staff by saying that she did not speak any French or Creole and that it was a great occasion for them to practice their English in order to communicate with her.

³¹ From Creole, literally meaning “people from outside”; the concept is used to identify those who are taxed and marginalized and without representation. *Moun andeyo* largely coincides with the peasant community, settled in rural areas, in contrast with governors and elites who are based in the city.



Image 2: Mouse in the pool of the guesthouse, Pétienville, Haiti, October 2010. Photograph: Ermina Martini.

One day I was looking out from my bedroom window of the guesthouse and I saw a mouse as big as a rat trapped in the empty swimming pool, searching for an exit. That's how I felt in my daily routine: I was becoming more and more isolated in my working and living environment. Nobody in the small circle seemed to share my feelings or my sense of my position. For them, I am pretty sure I was pictured as the oddball or the radical. My way of resisting combined two strategies. First, I tried to escape the circle: I made contacts with other foreigners working for small local organizations; many had lived in Haiti prior to the earthquake; they knew the context better and they were not bounded by severe security rules or obliged to live in the organizations' guesthouse. I also tried as much as possible to establish relationships with locals working in the same office space, trying to grasp some understanding of their country, their cultural heritage, and their experience of the quake. I broke the rules on a few occasions in order to 'explore' the place on my own, such as when I went to a downtown concert to listen the most popular local band – a no-go zone according to our security dictate. Secondly, I engaged in tiny private battles, like the one in defence of the housekeepers' rights. I told the ladies that they only had to work six days a week and I informed my colleagues of the working arrangement with the housekeepers. Still, every Sunday when I saw dirty dishes in the sink, I yelled at my colleagues that they had to clean their own stuff. I kept telling the ladies not to clean on Sundays. They were so used to being at the disposal of the previous owner that they hardly believed they had a right to some resting time. However, looking back retrospectively, maybe they were annoyed by my zeal. Was that a battle for my own sense of justice, rather than for theirs?

In my first short stay I experienced many events in the country, from the cholera epidemics, to Hurricane Tomas, to the local political elections and the ensuing disorder. Yet, I felt I knew so little about Haiti by the time I left. I worked extremely hard and with the sincere intention of doing good; however, I ended my assignment exhausted by my internal conflict. I was extremely angry and disappointed by the aid system I observed and of which I was part; I felt that we aid workers reproduced the “inequitable power relations that international aid is meant to challenge”.³² Nevertheless, I was not sure if I betrayed my beliefs or if my beliefs – my idealistic principles of development and cooperation – betrayed me. I only remember feeling guilty looking at my bank account and realizing my savings increased thanks to the months I worked in Haiti.

Marjaana: Helsinki 2001 - Aceh 2006 – making a return to ‘expatriatism’

In October 2001 I returned to Finland from India, struggled to find permanent or semi-permanent jobs and, once again, was questioning my belonging to Finland and my career choices. The luxurious life of a young UN professional was over and my journal entries reflect my uncertain future:

27 December 2001: My life seems to be at a massive turning point and I am trying to make sense of the knot. Opening it and make sense of the thread. I do not yet know what direction to take and how. I have so many ideas what I could do, but I am not sure if such ideas are doable and that lets me down in a major way. I think I am done with the project managerial tasks and would like to build myself to become an expert, focus on the themes of women’s empowerment and gender mainstreaming, as I’ve so long wanted to....

Two months later:

I have struggled a lot over the past few months, am feeling anxious and insecure. Although I still don’t feel to be a ‘complete’ professionally (and personally I no longer believe in such things) I realise that this is a crisis I have to go through right now. Enough years have passed without having space or time to reflect critically on them.

I seem to have not written at all about the feelings I had when I had to admit to others that I was unemployed. Or that having had such a prestigious opportunity to work with the UN did not result in becoming a UN bureaucrat or a permanent part of the global aid expert circles, as had happened for some of my former colleagues. I wanted to return to Finland, but I was not ready to face the hardships of finding jobs, or facing myself as someone who has to construct her identity through other means than the prestigious position of an expatriate.

I ended up working as a freelancer for the next five years, balancing between the unemployment benefits and salaries, but also getting to travel to other aid contexts in East Timor and Bosnia-Herzegovina, this time as a project planning and evaluation consultant. In 2005, eight months after the Indian Ocean tsunami and the earthquakes I was made an offer to join one of the international non-governmental organizations in Banda Aceh to work in their post-tsunami recovery programme as a monitoring and evaluation adviser. The job was for four months, later to be extended by one month and again given the possibility of another, longer extension, which I ultimately turned down.

³² Cathy Shutt, “Power in Aid Relationships: A Personal View,” *IDS Bulletin*, 37:6, 2006, 79-87 (81).

This time, my Finnish-scale salary was paid by the Finnish section of the organization and I had decided not to negotiate an increase. I was happy to be offered the same salary as I would have in Finland in a similar position. I remember this as part of my own internal debate on the ethics of continuing to do aid, potentially driven by my previous experience in India, where I felt that the UN salary scale was outrageously high compared with the locally-recruited staff members, let alone compared with anyone working outside the UN system. My un-negotiated contract would not change the system, but it was my own way of making sense of the inequalities that the aid system was constantly building, from one disaster/aid geography to another. I also remember actively thinking that this time I would do things differently. The fact that I was going to be a colleague to new people, who would not necessarily know anything about me or my past felt like a good thing. I enjoyed the possibility of starting all over again.

Marjaana: Am I inside or outside?

I made a conscious decision from day one to exclude myself as much as possible from the expatriate community. Perhaps it was the guilt of having spent the glorious/luxurious lifestyle as a twenty-something in New Delhi, or perhaps it was because I was no longer employed by a UN organisation, but rather located at the lower ranks of aid hierarchy – as an NGO worker. Or perhaps it was because the town of Banda Aceh is not a metropolis. Having been demolished by the tsunami and the earthquake, it initially had no infrastructure to accommodate the needs of the aid-class. Upon my arrival in May 2006 – nearly 20 months into post tsunami reconstruction – the symbols and material practices were already in place: house parties, illegally bought alcohol, special grocery shops, cafes and restaurants, weekend trips to the beach, and the shopping malls of Medan, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore. Whatever the reasons I began excluding myself from the expatriate community, I found myself more interested in listening to my Acehnese and Indonesian colleagues. My eyes were opened to the politics of inclusion and exclusion in the office and in Aidland. I remained a whitey, or *bule*, but gained new understandings of the nuances, multiple positionalities, and colonial legacies present in Aceh's Aidland through listening to my Javanese colleagues reflecting on their own colonial positionalities within the thirty-year-long conflict between the Acehnese independence movement and the Indonesian government - and sharing their own feelings of being outsiders in Aceh.

From early on I was taught the rules of being an expatriate staff member – rules that I initially did not dare to question. In fact, the initiation into the role of an expatriate or international staff member started prior to my arrival in Aceh. After signing the contract, the country office in Jakarta approached me with a “Personal Safety and Security Guidelines for Visitors” and a “Pre-departure Memo” all detailing the rights and duties of an ‘international staff member’, including travel arrangements through Jakarta, medical coverage, evacuation and insurance schemes, and so on. A set of rules listed official vehicle usage and housing provisions, all of which I later learned were denied to Indonesian staff members employed outside Aceh and to Acehnese staff members employed locally.

The expatriate staff resided in huge mansions vacated by elite Acehnese with cleaning and laundry taken care of and drivers transporting them between the house and the office. They complained about a couple of days' shortage of clean running water. The Indonesian staff were renting out properties from another cohort of middle-class Acehnese, sorting out their own cleaning and laundry, were transported between house and office at their own expense and, most of the time, as with any other Acehnese residing in Banda Aceh, suffered from a lack of clean water. Where the

Acehnese staff lived and what scars of the conflict and the tsunami they were trying to heal, I never found out. Yet all of us as staff members of this international organisation were working for the tsunami-affected Acehnese, of whom nearly 60 to 80 per cent were still living either in emergency tents or temporary barracks.

Given the improved security situation after the peace agreement had been signed between the Acehnese independence movement and the government of Indonesia, a few months into my assignment the administrative department decided to reduce the use of office vehicles off-duty. Many of my expatriate colleagues were outraged. They felt isolated with no possibility of commuting. Walking, cycling, motorbiking or using the *bejak*³³ drivers for the 1km distance as an alternative was not seen as an option. Some of the female local staff members working late hours in the office were trying to ask for their right for a secure working environment as they felt their journey between the office and house was unsafe for them. Some of them were harassed and physically attacked.

When I received my first extension, I decided to move out from the 'expatriate house'. It was against the office rules, but I did it anyway. I moved into an arrangement with an Indonesian colleague who shared a house with six other Indonesian colleagues within walking distance of the office. Sharing housing like this, I later learned, was common for educated Indonesians working for aid organizations, whose employment occurs through temporary contracts and can take them to work anywhere in the Indonesian archipelago or wherever the development aid machinery is located.

Marjaana: Researching the post-tsunami aid community 2007-2013

After the five months spent in Aceh in 2006 and after having turned down two major aid career opportunities to continue working in post-disaster and post-conflict reconstruction programmes, I was given the opportunity to conduct funded doctoral research on the politics of promoting gender equality programmes in Aceh. Turning the analytical gaze towards the aid community was a therapeutic experience. I felt I was now 'outside' looking in. But without my background and experience slipping out of the aid machinery, I might have missed some material and embodied ethnographic experiences that were to come over the following years as I studied Banda Aceh. As a researcher, one of the key learning points was to start studying the map of the town by foot and relying on the public transportation that was available. I realized very concretely the many parallel-lived experiences of Aceh that seemed to be repeating again and again in the context of development workers, bureaucrats and politicians, and in the varying class dividers of the town. In June 2013 I attended a hip-hop concert in one of the public parks in Banda Aceh and met a young American intern who had arrived in Banda Aceh just two months earlier. She was hanging out with her Acehnese peers from the local university, talking about their parties, weekend getaways, aid job markets, and so on. That moment was both daunting and revealing: one part of me was exhausted by the realization that my reflective professional decision of 'un-becoming' an aid expert made very little difference in the big picture. Yet these repetitive career paths make the structures of Aidland concrete and visible. That moment also offered a few other critical reflective points: turning from an aid worker into a researcher on aid and humanitarianism was another typical trope of the Global North, although I had initially thought of it as my escape from Aidland.

Am I really an outsider to all this? Is there such a thing as an 'outside' to the humanitarianism/aid machinery? Is this seemingly easy binary of inside-outside just an attempt to construct the

³³ Indonesian word for motorcycle rickshaw.

connected and troubling world we live in into two separate life-worlds of Aidland and the rest, and with what effect? Retrospectively, I would argue that no matter into which position I move my body or what I work on, I am part of a wider nexus of knowledge production on aid. My childhood dream of ‘becoming part of the world’ was always already there. I just had not seen it yet. The wish to ‘become part of the world’ is not only telling of the ways in which the non-European Other is maintained and recreated, but it is also telling of the hierarchical expectations and notions of global spatiality and lived experience in a small town in provincial Finland. After some 26 years, I returned to that small town I had lived in until I was 14 to participate in my primary school class reunion. Whilst sharing our stories around the table I noticed that it was those who had stayed who were apologetic for not having exciting or interesting stories to tell. I was mourning silently and feeling envious of a former classmate who was telling how sick and bored she felt eating that same freshly caught fish from the lake every day. The fish represented to her the unexciting, the provincial and boring, whereas it was a new exotic to me. The repetition and continuation of the ‘local’ that was suffocating for her was a lack for me.

Ermina: The fake redemption: the local’s sub-circle. 2012

After my first trip to Haiti, I wanted to take a break; I was starting to doubt my desire to continue with a career in the development aid sector. I started to explore academia and for one year I worked full time on my doctoral study. Then an old friend who works for a small NGO based in my hometown contacted me. I volunteered for that organization when I was at the university and then, soon after graduating, I worked as a civil servant with the same organization in Burkina Faso. This organization has few resources that it uses with great care. The staff at headquarters take turns cooking lunch for colleagues, often using vegetables from the office’s garden, which is also managed by volunteers. I knew they followed an approach focused on people and long-term partnership. They never really worked in the emergency field. Their decision to operate in Haiti was meant to offset the short-term approach that is typical of relief efforts. After two years of preparatory work, including field missions and desk study for project proposals, they received a European Union project grant. It was a two-year program to promote and defend the rights of Haitian women victims of violence, providing them psychological, medical, and legal assistance and raising awareness through information dissemination. The project was to be implemented with two local partner organizations, which were deeply rooted in the civil society movements and that were recognized for their fight to defend human rights. When my old friend contacted me, he knew of my interest in Haiti, which also became the research topic for my doctoral dissertation. He asked me if I would go to Haiti and start up their first project. I told myself that maybe it was a good occasion to see development with new eyes, to get to know the real Haiti, to stand with the people and for them. The salary was not appealing at all, but it was enough; they had no office there, no vehicle, nothing apart from motivations. I agreed and I strongly believed it was going to be my ‘redemption’ for my past artless enthusiasm and adherence to top-down approaches to development aid. This time I was entering the aid circle from the grass-roots level and I was going to work more closely with the Haitians. At my arrival in Port-au-Prince, I was accompanied by my old friend who was acting as desk officer of the organization. He was one of the charity workers or missionaries that Arvidson³⁴ describes as professional altruists, whose commitment is moral rather than purely technical. I don’t know whether the altruist might be better than the professional, but I know that I somehow hoped to be more like him, because he was able to ignore a tension which had worn me out – that tension of existing between the everyday problems of doing aid work and

³⁴ Malin Arvidson, “Contradictions and confusions in development work: exploring the reality of Bangladeshi NGOs,” *Journal of South Asian Development* 3:1, 2008, 109-34.

the constant demands for benevolence and altruism that dominate aid rhetoric.³⁵ Maybe it was because, unlike him, I was trained to be an aid worker and working in humanitarian aid was my career path. Or maybe it was because he had a religious faith, which I never cultivated. We waited a while outside the crowded airport before a driver arrived; some friends sent him to fetch us. Stacked in the traffic jam, suddenly the car broke down. It was dark already, and we knew it was not the best situation for two foreigners and their luggage to be in the middle of downtown. One hour later our friends arrived with a second vehicle, the car was tied up with a rope and we were towed in the dirt roads towards the neighbourhood of Croix des Bouquers, one of the popular suburbs of the city, where we were lodged at the site of a missionary congregation. The accommodation was basic: approximately 30 square meters divided in two single bedrooms, one empty kitchen and one modest toilet with cold water. It was actually the prototype of the permanent shelters the Father of the congregation was building for displaced Haitian families in the surrounding area. There was almost no furniture, apart from shabby little beds and a plastic table with two chairs. The noisy generator was running only during the day; at night, the silence was disturbed by the whine of hungry mosquitos. In the same dusty site there were a dozen similar little houses, where people from different groups and associations were hosted by the congregation: Brazilian nuns, medical volunteers from Chile, two clowns working in the school, and some retired Italian construction workers helping the Father with the housing project.

My role in the project was meant to be smooth: I was to facilitate the start-up phase, establishing partnership agreements with the local associations, working with them on activities plans, holding monthly steering meetings, supporting the financial and administration management, which had to comply with the donor procedures, and getting to know better the work of our partners. The last aim was actually the main goal of my assignment. But it was never smooth. Our two local partner organizations developed different attitudes; the women's association regarded me with suspicion from day one. The two women at the head of the organization were unfriendly. They wanted to keep me at a distance, not answering my phone calls or my mail, not taking part in the meetings, behaving with superiority and constantly showing a haughty attitude. It took almost three months to get an agreement signed and even more for a draft work plan and for their request of the first instalment of the grant. They used tiny pretexts to contest every single proposal or communication coming from me or from my organization. I was keen to know their work, to understand their challenges and how they operated on the ground. They perceived my efforts as an attempt to infiltrate their arena and they had little time to share information with me; I was also told not to go to their office without making an appointment with one of the two leaders and to talk only through them. I finally realized that they could not look at me without the prejudice dictated by their experience of past foreign domination, and I thought it was reasonable. I also now understand that my desire to 'know' the other could have been perceived as a modern reproduction of the settler-colonial project to apprehend, contain and domesticate the indigenous people.³⁶ And who knows if this approach was not even more damaging to the locals than the tactic of the violent conqueror! However, the logic of foreign aid implies certain rules, like transparency and accountability, which they were free not to comply with because they knew many other foreign organizations and donors were in search for local partners. If my organization had left, it would not have impacted them.

³⁵ Fechter and Hindman, 2.

³⁶ Andrea Smith, *The Problem with "Privilege"* (Accessed 26 August, 2013)

<http://andrea366.wordpress.com/2013/08/14/>; Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

The project did not advance, and we were largely behind the schedule dictated by our donor. They often told me they had no time for my small NGO; they had other donors to deal with of higher priority. The second project's partner had a different approach. It was a local association of journalists and educators engaged in disseminating information through alternative media and raising awareness for people's rights. They were more outgoing and willing to work together, even if their share of the project's activities was minor. They perceived my presence as an opportunity to get more funding, and they exploited it. I was feeling confident and comfortable with the situation, teaching 'aid-speak' and helping them to prepare new project proposals. Weeks passed, and my security started to shake: I knew I was not going to getting any closer to my local colleagues. And, I knew the final beneficiaries of our projects were completely abstract to my eyes. I was gathering information on the target recipients to fill the project's templates, numbers, descriptions of their needs, and explanation of their vulnerabilities, but who were these people? What were their feelings, their fears? How was their daily life? I could never enter in such an intimate relationship with them to fully comprehend it and I was vexed by this failure.

Increasingly, I also understood there were inner fractures in the local civil society, and I could not make sense of them. The leaders of both partner organizations had salaries much higher than mine; they lived in nice houses, with all the comforts and hired-help at their disposal; their kids were in boarding schools in Dominican Republic or France; they were driving nice cars, going to nice restaurants and shopping in posh supermarkets. Their privileges were similar to those of the majority of expatriates working in Haiti. Like them, there were many others: in Haiti there is a proliferation of leftist civil society organizations and they form a circle within the aid circle. They condemn the past and current foreign domination, with international donors dictating what to do, but they are an integral part of the system. While experiencing this other side of the circle, my anguish and frustration were growing. I felt powerless. Besides the inefficiency and lack of commitment of the implementing partners, it was in my NGO's interest to continue with the project but not really in the name of the poor women victims of violence we had initially aimed to help. My NGO was deeply reliant on EU funding, and not only in Haiti. Stopping an ongoing project funded by this donor implied admitting that the adopted implementation strategy was not efficient and the organization could not afford this loss of credibility. In addition, for small NGOs inserted in the highly competitive aid system, losing the little percentage of the grant that is allocated to cover running cost could have severe budgetary implications.

While driving my ramshackle vehicle I often spent time in traffic jams, waiting in line behind colourful tap-tap, the local means of transportation. I was looking from behind the windscreen at the patient Haitians sitting in the trailer: what were they thinking of me? Would they wonder where I come from? What I'm doing in Haiti? Most probably, they were simply thinking why a young, white foreign woman is sitting in an air-conditioned car, while they are pressed in the truck suffering the heat.

No redemption took place during my second stay in the country. On the contrary, I felt constantly inadequate working and living in Haiti. I could not find a way to fit into any circle, especially the local one. Maybe my experience of poverty, abuse, and marginalization in Haiti was thus more grounded, but development and aid became blurred and meaningless to me. While writing 'mystory', the confession of another aid worker³⁷ appeared in *The New York Times*. Confessing is

³⁷ Nora Shenkel, "I came to Haiti to do good..." *The New York Times*, May 15, 2013 (Accessed 19 June, 2013) <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/16/opinion/global/i-came-to-haiti-to-do-good.html>

becoming popular in development and the similarities of the tales reveal there is “little to our claim of uniqueness or our presumed self-indulgence”³⁸. Who, then, will hear our confessions? Both teller and listener are members of the same community, whose voices are trapped in the same loop, victims of the same hegemony. We own the privilege of confessing, but by telling our stories we reproduce the same structures of domination we wanted to resist.³⁹ Peter Mandaville says, “But it’s all about how we live with ourselves once we know the lie to be a lie. So at some point we need to stop asking questions about how and what we do in/to IR and start asking what IR does for /to us”.⁴⁰ After confessing in our small circle we should look at what development does for/to us. How do we live with our lie? Is doing research an alternative to try to contrast the hegemony we observed firsthand?

Reading the other’s story

Ermina: Reading Marjaana’s story, I felt I did not have to explain more about my social background or my career initiation. Somehow, she had already said everything. Reading her story I could hear the voice of my mother talking on the phone with her friends and trying to explain what I was studying at the university, trying to answer questions about my profession, and trying to understand why I did not want to become a more normal worker, an attorney for example, the clearest example in her imagination of a middle class professional. I was also, together with my brother, the first generation of my family that completed a Masters degree; as a special gift for our graduation we received a prestigious wristwatch, symbolizing the entrance into the upper class. Later, I remember I was ashamed to wear it when I was with my aid worker friends. I also remember, in more recent times, being asked by bourgeois intellectuals why I was always heading to awful places (meaning Haiti, Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of Congo) and finding myself speechless (and still speechless).

When I returned to my hometown in Italy after my assignments abroad, I felt disoriented, as if those places that used to be familiar were not mine anymore. I tried occasionally to resettle there, but I was not able to. It was not enough for me to be, for example, a social worker in my local community: I was still convinced I had to go further to recognize and deal with the injustice of the world.⁴¹ Old friends were eager to see my exotic pictures, hear my stories. I was jealous to see pictures of their kids, hear about their vacations in the nearby mountains and feel the commonness of their lives. I also faced the burden of unemployment, which stimulated the creativity to turn myself into something new, something more appealing in the job market. I recently managed to make that turn and I entered a new fortress, the one inhabited by policy makers. I am becoming a European bureaucrat and I am afraid of the consequences. I deal with asylum policy and I have no direct contact with refugees or immigrants; I only talk with other public officers and with experts. Our voices are again trapped and we follow the same approach of governing at a distance that Duffield describes when talking of the international aid system.⁴² Maybe carrying on my doctoral dissertation constitutes my new attempt at redemption from my childish desire to change what is wrong with the world. But, will researching development in academia be really different from

³⁸ Inayatullah, 8.

³⁹ Smith, *Problem*.

⁴⁰ Peter Mandaville, “Cosmography Recapitulates Biography: an Epilogue,” in Inayatullah ed., *Autobiographical IR*, 196-203 (196).

⁴¹ Maja Zehfuss, “What Can We Do to Change the World?” in Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss, eds., *Global Politics: A New Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 483-501.

⁴² Mark Duffield, “Governing the Borderlands: Decoding the Power of Aid,” *Disasters*, 25:4, 2001, 308-320.

working in Aidland? I have to confess that I was not courageous enough to renounce the security of a long-term job rather than committing myself to a full-time doctoral studentship. I keep living with my lie.

Marjaana: Before co-writing this text I have had few chances to reflect upon my unease, or class/race positioning, other than through passing anecdotes and inside jokes with other aid experts. I suppose it tells us something about the aid machinery and how classed geopolitics become normalized in our lives. Therefore, it was eye-opening for me to read Ermina's descriptions of certain everyday practices, particularly the gendered and racialized division of labour that allows us as aid experts to do our daily jobs, such as dependency on the domestic help whose task is to clean the house and wash our clothes so that we can work as 'professionals'. Whereas in India I officially and reluctantly became an employer of domestic help, in Indonesia I hardly ever met the local domestic help as they were recruited by the office and their daily routines included visiting several expatriate houses. So, instead of getting to know them, I got to know their handwriting in my clothes, letters 'M' or names 'Mariyana' written on the seams or washing labels of my shirts, trousers and underwear. I still wear these clothes, although they are no longer shiny and new. My house, my wardrobe, and bookshelves have never been as clean as they were in India or Aceh. Many of my academic colleagues have hired domestic help even here in Finland. Those women are usually from Estonia, Russia, Philippines, or Thailand and, thus, making an academic career these days is also embedded in global flows of racialized, gendered and classed bodies, hardly recognised as 'expatriates'.⁴³

Concluding remarks

The autobiographical stories narrated in this article talk to each other through the multiple layers of the global Aidland structure: departing from Europe to the United Nations system, shifting to the International Non Governmental Organizations and to the local civil society organizations, and finally to the academic community. The stories describe the mobility and temporariness of careers that consist of series of time-bound contracts and professional fluidity.⁴⁴ Temporariness and mobility become an addictive yet demanding lifestyle that tends to oppose the common gendered norms of settling down. Being deployed in the field as an aid worker implies an unspoken expectation of adjustability and feelings of happiness in any context, regardless of prior knowledge of the place or the length of the stay. The focus is on place (physical locality) rather than space (engagement and relationship with the local).⁴⁵ Furthermore, our stories are told in the intersection of class, gender, and whiteness. Importantly, the pages reveal the struggle in recognition of one crucial background experience: 'Europeanness', which comes with the package of colonialism, Orientalism, and an orientation towards the world through normalized patterns of inclusion and exclusion. It is an encompassing heritage that affects our behaviour with at times painfully naïve mind-sets about 'the Other', exploration, explanation, repetition of colonial conditions, and which easily challenges our ability to question the centrality of Europe, or the attitude of "white women saving brown women from brown men".⁴⁶ As bell hooks suggests, it is

⁴³ Ian Harper, "World Health and Nepal: Producing Internationals, Healthy Citizenship and the Cosmopolitan," in Mosse, ed., 123-138.

⁴⁴ Rajak and Stirrat, "Parochial Cosmopolitanism and the Power of Nostalgia," in Mosse, 161. See also Hindman and Fechter, 9; Fechter, "Anybody", 143; Lisa Smirl, "Plain Tales from the Reconstruction Site: Spatial Continuities in Contemporary Humanitarian Practice," in Mark Duffield and Vernon Hewitt, eds., *Empire, Development & Colonialism: The Past in the Present*, (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2009), 92-95.

⁴⁵ Sallie A. Marston, "The Social Construction of Scale," *Progress in Human Geography*, 24:2, 2000, 219-242.

⁴⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Introduction: Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions," in Lila Abu-Lughod, ed.,

not sufficient to “eat a bit of the other” in order to erase race or class dividers. Rather, it would require mutual recognition of racism to build a common ground for an encounter that is neither based on denial nor fantasy.⁴⁷

These intersections form an important background to our aid experience: they “orient bodies in specific directions...affecting how they ‘take up’ space...and what bodies can do”.⁴⁸ Yet, although the whiteness of our reflections was self-evident to us, we were only able to verbalize it through our interaction with the conference audience in November 2013. Uma Kothari has asked: “Is raising the issue of ‘race’ too distracting, disruptive or demanding? Or does the silence...conceal the complicity of development with racialized projects?” Kothari suggests that it is precisely these silences that signal the need to map and think about development as “a geopolitics of race”.⁴⁹ Thus, our common feelings of difference, or of ‘being an outsider’, are not merely cultural. Social interactions in aid are affected by race, class, gender, and economic status⁵⁰ and are conceptualized in questions like: ‘whose voice matters’, ‘who is taken seriously’, and ‘what drives the development machine’? For instance, there is no direct correlation between the scale of a disaster and the media coverage it gains. Rather, analysis of Western media coverage of humanitarian disasters suggests that other factors, such as politics and the perceived economic impact of a disaster on western markets determine timing, level of exposure, and the story angle.⁵¹

Our life experiences have exemplified ‘traveling rationalities’ – sets of ideas, right theories, and good policies produced in international institutions and transferred to countries around the world with the aim of solving the problems generated by humanitarian disasters.⁵² Those rationalities appear context-free: the disaster could occur in Haiti, Aceh or any other location and it would be assumed to have the same universal applicability. Our reflective memories became anchored around various details of the material artefacts of Aidland: the clothes, the pool, the door that separated the area reserved for the housemaids from the rest of the guesthouse. This opens up an important question as to whether these material practices support the existence of Aidland, building on the continuities and discontinuities of colonial practices⁵³ and ‘imperialistic nostalgia’.⁵⁴

A new generation of skilled aid workers is not sufficient for Aidland to exist and prosper: its structures depend upon an important construction of the world embedded with the desire to travel, to ‘become part of the world’ and to rectify what is wrong with it: famine, poverty, war. However, this vision implies a simplistic idea of human power⁵⁵ that both of us have experienced through our journeys in Aidland. This article could be read as a mourning of the loss of idealistic ideas of

Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 14.

⁴⁷ bell hooks, “Eating the Other”, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 28.

⁴⁸ Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory*, 8:2, 2007, 150.

⁴⁹ Uma Kothari, “Critiquing ‘race’ and racism in development discourse and practice,” *Progress in Development Studies*, 6:1, 2006, 2.

⁵⁰ Shutt, 82.

⁵¹ CARMA Int., *The CARMA Report on Western Media Coverage of Humanitarian Disasters*. (European Offices of CARMA International, 2006) (Accessed 19 October, 2013): <http://www.carma.com/research/#research>

⁵² Mosse, 4.

⁵³ Smirl in Duffield and Hewitt, 88-89.

⁵⁴ hooks, 29; see also Rajak and Stirrat, *Parochial*.

⁵⁵ Zehfuss, “What Can We Do,” 612.

‘doing good’, defeated by the awareness and consequent frustration that we cannot address the unfairness of the world. Maja Zehfuss has asked: “who do we think we are that we want to change the world?”⁵⁶ The hardest part of this writing process has been to admit the naturalised positioning of oneself, of Europe, and of aid expertise at the centre of global problems and the possibility of changing them. We struggle to let go of the idea of making things better; however, sharing our feelings of loss and struggle with other participants in Aidland calls for “unlearning our privileges as our loss”,⁵⁷ to retrace the history and itinerary of our prejudices and learned habits. “[T]he possibility of subalternity for me acts as a reminder...when you seem to have solved a problem, that victory, that solution, is a warning...”⁵⁸ In the words of Judith Butler, “[t]rouble is inevitable and the task, how to best make it, what best way to be in it”.⁵⁹ That’s why also concluding this article is rather difficult, and it is probably part of the narrative process itself to realize, at the end of our journey, that we cannot offer any easy solution on how to do things differently in development aid. Thus, facing the challenge to draw any firm conclusions, we prefer to end with a dialogue that calls upon our unsolved inner questions:

Ermina: I read that piece on white posh blokes in NGOs,⁶⁰ and I agree with the idea of small concrete steps. However, right now, in my position, I struggle to identify any action to be taken. Maybe I could just let my Haitian counterparts tell their confessions/accusations. But will my inner self let me freely listen to their stories? And what will be next? Can I really believe that doing my doctoral research will lead to that successful redemption I aimed for? This article is becoming a sort of therapeutic writing! Sharing my intimate memories with somebody who was not in Haiti with me, but who can grasp my emotions and my discomfort made me realize I am not alone facing this inner struggle of being part of a development machine that deceived my expectations. The process of reflecting upon our journeys turned out to be transformative and empowering because it provoked in me what Spivak defines as the transformation of consciousness – a change of mind-set.⁶¹ Maybe NGOs and International Organizations could think about giving development practitioners the opportunity to re-examine their everyday practices. In this way they/we could be challenged to reflect on the structures of the global political economy that make the aid machine a way of covering up the economic rights of human beings.

Marjaana: I am also thinking that perhaps it is important to have those feelings of ‘things did not go as planned’ while ‘doing aid’, as that would be the only way to realize that ‘doing aid’ is impossible. However, Spivak’s reminder of subalterity enabled me to respond to those who claim that critical scholarship is worthy only if it offers easy policy solutions. Isn’t this yet another common trap that has been promptly criticised in development: that complex social realities and experiences are turned into technical aspects of problem solving? Yet, I believe we all are offered the possibility to revolutionise our lives and engage in daily counter-hegemonic action: open the

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can The Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Chicago: Illini Books, 1988), 287.

⁵⁸ Spivak, quoted in Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, “Subaltern Talk: Interview with Editors (1993-94),” in Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, eds., *The Spivak Reader*. (London: Routledge, 1996), 293.

⁵⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999[1990]) xxvii.

⁶⁰ Guppi Bola, “On posh white blokes in NGOs” (Accessed 23 October, 2013)

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/guppi-bola/on-posh-white-blokes-in-ngos>

⁶¹ Ilan Kapoor, “Hyper-self-reflective development? Spivak on representing the Third World ‘Other’” *Third World Quarterly* 25:4, 2004, 627-647 (641).

door that you, Ermina, described so well and learn about the lives of the people who work for ‘us’, and find out the conditions where those scarves were sewn – but that does not need to be turned into better development policies.

Somehow, on the micro scale of my current research practice, I think I am continuously trying to undo the understanding of an (aid) expert, but also of the scholar that I was/am so keen to become. I remain painstakingly aware that academia does not stand outside the geopolitics and accelerated neoliberal governmentality aiming to turn Aceh and Haiti into ‘research laboratories’.⁶² Thus, the undoing also includes resisting the idea of easy transfers from one disaster zone to another, as one university press suggested to me in order to get more attractive comparative perspectives for the International Relations/Politics academic book markets. To me, essentially, these practices and canonised ways of working require counter-hegemonic resistance – whether this involves working within or outside of formal academic employment.

One participant at the conference asked us: “What happens next?” This article does not aim to offer an answer. It only suggests that by sharing the troubling, the unspoken, and the mundane, it is possible to get a bit closer to the practice of ‘writing from the heart’⁶³ through which “we learn how to love, to forgive, to heal, and to move forward”.⁶⁴ Where that ‘forward’ is for the two of us remains to be seen.

⁶² Antje Missbach, “Ransacking The Field?” *Critical Asian Studies*, 43:3, 2011, 373-398.

⁶³ Denzin, *Autoethnography*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 423.