

**GRINGO POLITICS**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Encounters between gringo volunteers and local residents in San Andrés are always heavily-laden with politics. “Gringo” and “local” identities come into being in relation to each other; they are not pre-assigned but rather worked out in practice on the ground, where multiple inequalities are re-produced, re-negotiated, and/or re-enforced. Gringo positioning invokes many of the histories, geographies and asymmetries of Northern imperialism. This baggage inspires a variety of different responses from gringos, each with different political implications. Using ethnographic methods, I trace gringo-ness in practice and find that exclusionary, whitened, and self-affirming patterns begin to emerge.

I question how critical methodological, theoretical, and practical engagements with “gringo” might allow this identity to be used as a tool of politicization or decolonization. After tracing the ways that being “gringo” plays out in San Andrés, I ask how this identity might be practiced in more emancipatory ways that deliberately challenge imperialism and whitened privilege. I set my sights on the methodological potential of critical gringo-ness as an articulation of my desire to conduct academic research in a way that recognizes the force of – but resists reinscribing – racialized, economic, gendered, and geopolitical privileges.

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# 1. Introduction: Gringos in San Andrés, Petén, Guatemala



Figure 1: Map of the department of Petén in northern Guatemala, bordering Mexico and Belize

There is an almost indescribable feeling of anticipation that I get every single time I travel from Guatemala City to San Andrés at the beginning of a visit; a delicate mixture of nerves and nostalgia that I don't feel anywhere else. Excited nervousness at seeing all of my in-laws again, wondering if they'll tease me for forgetting so much Spanish and for having the same old hairstyle as last time; thinking about how much our nieces and nephews will have grown up, and worrying that I probably brought the wrong-sized gifts for them. Wistful nostalgia for the days when I lived in San Andrés and didn't feel like such a visitor, when driving into town was an ordinary non-event; wondering in the back of my mind if and when we'll ever be able to come back for good. It's a long eight-hour trip from Guatemala City, and while I'm usually pretty antsy the whole way, my

anticipation always hits an unbearably high note as soon as I catch a glimpse of stunning and still Lake Petén Itza, about fifteen minutes outside of town. I know I'll be swimming in it soon. And I can almost taste the tortillas already...

In Canada, it's easy for me to forget that I'm a gringa. It is an identity that only exists in relation to other people in other places. In San Andrés, however, it's an inescapable label that follows me constantly, being subtly re-worked as I go along. In town I belong a little bit, but not really: I'm a gringa married to a local guy who hasn't lived there in years, my white-girl Spanish skills are fluent enough but still the source of at least a couple of supremely hilarious mistakes per week (which somehow always happen in the company of my mother-in-law, who thankfully appreciates a good laugh more than anyone else I know). Some things in San Andrés are easy for me that are never as straightforward for locals: I can come to Guatemala pretty much whenever I want, and I can catch a plane back home to Canada without anyone batting an eyelash, much less demanding to know how I managed to pay for the ticket. If I ever needed something – say, emergency surgery – my travel insurance company (or failing, that, my family) is just a phone call away.

There is a long list of gringa traits that differentiate me in relation to local people in San Andrés, and these differences are always at the forefront of my mind when I come to visit, most especially in the first few days after arriving when they stand out the most. Some of them are somewhat banal, and many of them carry heavy political weight. Most of the things that set me apart bespeak an advantageous and comparatively privileged position. Such positioning is also inseparable from the particular blend of nerves and

nostalgia that hit me on my initial approach; inseparable from the ways I see the town, and from the ways that I see myself in it.

It was thinking about the political implications of my gringa-ness: the ways I am complicit in the upholding of gringo privileges, the ways that being called “gringa” can shed some light on these privileges, and the ways that gringo-ness could be practiced differently that got me thinking about all this as a possible subject of research in San Andrés. None of my visits have been “innocent”. I have come to see that my gringa positioning is always political, whether acknowledged as such or not. It both outlines and upholds an asymmetrical relationship in the Americas between North and South that has so far been over five hundred years in the making. Many of the inequalities associated with this encounter are subtly re-performed, reproduced, reinforced, or renegotiated in seemingly harmless, mundane practices like gringos going to San Andrés.

I decided to undertake research in San Andrés to examine the politics of gringo identities and my inquiry focused around a series of questions: What does “gringo” mean? How do gringos see themselves? What are the political implications of differing definitions of “gringo”? How are gringo identities made and practiced in San Andrés? What kinds of political, historical, and geographical baggage are embedded in these identities? How do gringos understand and enact the differences and inequalities that come to light vis-à-vis local people in San Andrés? What is at stake in these encounters? For whom? How might gringo-ness be practiced in more emancipatory ways? How can critical gringo identities illuminate possibilities for challenging imperialism and privilege? Why do I want to study gringo-ness in San Andrés? How do I talk about



gringos in a responsible and accountable manner? What are the political implications of my research practice?

I conducted fieldwork for this project over a six month period from May to October 2008. During this time I worked as a volunteer with Volunteer Petén, a foreign-run nongovernmental organization (NGO) in town, where I had the chance to socialize with and work alongside many other gringo volunteers. In addition to conducting voice-recorded interviews with forty-one participants, I also kept a record of events, informal conversations, and personal impressions in my fieldnotes. Because of the ethnographic nature of my fieldwork, I had the chance to experience first-hand how gringos talked about and practiced their gringo-ness, and how the encounter between gringos and local people played out on the ground.

Gilbert Joseph argues that “encounter” is a particularly appropriate term through which to conceive of North-South relations in the Americas. He explains:

Indeed the derivation of *encounter* from the Latin is itself instructive: the word fuses *in* (“in”) with *contra* (“against”). Thus, these terms designate processes and practices through which the other is rendered proximate or distant, friend or adversary (or some more ambiguous, ambivalent status), practices that entail mutual constructions and misunderstandings – the recourse to ‘othering’ and ‘orientalizing’ that is inherent in power-laden contexts. (1998: 8)

This framing nicely captures both the power relations and the negotiability that are integral aspects of gringo-local encounters, where positions and outcomes are not predetermined but are worked out on the ground in unpredictable, but not necessarily random ways. Gringos emerge relationally vis-à-vis locals in practice, but the range of possible positionings are not limitless either; the power-geometries of history, geography, and capital do not allow for everyone to move equally between places and subject positions with the same speed or ease.

I am fascinated by this encounter as it plays out in San Andrés, perhaps especially so because I feel its presence so acutely in my own life and often worry at its consequences in the lives of people whom I love very much, and whose stakes in the encounter are necessarily very different than my own. The fact that I am personally invested in this project has helped me to understand something of the messiness of practicing research. And it has renewed my respect and appreciation for those who deliberately choose projects that hit close to home. Personally, I've found both the rewards and the risks to be greater than what I had anticipated. Delving into gringo politics brought me many moments of anxiety. It has also, however, strengthened my faith in the importance of putting privileged positions under the microscope, in much the same way that ethnographers have traditionally made marginalized people into suitable subjects of research, but with very different political agendas and implications. I set my sights on the methodological potential of gringo-ness as an articulation of my desire to conduct academic research in a way that recognizes the force of, but resists reinscribing, racialized, economic, and gendered privileges.

My purpose in choosing to research gringos is to avoid framing this encounter in San Andrés as yet another story told from an imperialist Northern perspective. Too many research stories about Latin America already are. This project aims to critically interrogate under-examined Northern interpretations as they coalesce around “gringo” in a particular place and time. That I am always already a gringa storyteller in the process is undeniable; but my goal is one of Northern deconstruction and politicization, not affirmation. Hence, this project does not include San Andreseño voices; this was a deliberate, but difficult, decision. I am too uncomfortable with the potential for

appropriation that could come from my “studying” local people, and the political stakes in this respect are simply not the same when it comes to appropriating gringo voices and experiences. Put another way, it seems to me that San Andreseños have been studied enough already (see Schwartz 1990), whereas the gringos in town have not. Barbara Heron talks about a similar dilemma in her research on white Canadian development workers in Africa: “This is a hazard of deconstructing dominance: at the moment it is challenged, it reclaims centre stage and makes its issues the ones that count. Yet if not challenged, relations of domination will continue” (2007: 20). I share her concern of not wanting to re-instate whitened subject positions as being the primary movers and shakers that matter in a story. I can only hope that the potential I posit for re-thinking “gringo” could mitigate this risk.

My analysis borrows from recent ethnographic literature that investigates the emergence, practices, and consequences of white subjectivities abroad. Arun Saldanha’s book *Psychedelic White* (2007) looks at the exclusionary whiteness of tourism to Anjuna, India and suggests that race is a central tenet of power and privilege in tourism identities. Barbara Heron’s *Desire for Development* (2007) examines the self-imagining and helping imperative that lie at the heart of international development discourse. Her research focuses on white Canadian women who do development work in Africa and she traces the emergence of previous versions of the self-important “helper” to the early era of empire. She stressed that the “impulse to help” is first and foremost a self-defining move that is so deeply entangled with Northern discourse about the “Third World” that it appears natural and above questioning. Finally, Diane Nelson situates white foreign-ness in the context of Guatemala in *A Finger in the Wound* (1999), where she stresses that

because of their deep implication in power geometries, gringo identities are never as innocent as they might seem. All three writers share the view that whiteness abroad cannot be discussed in isolation from the politics, histories, and geographies that are woven into its power. These works emphasize that the stakes are not the same for everyone when whiteness travels overseas, and that most contemporary inequalities and power asymmetries cannot be separated from the ways that whiteness underpins them. I borrow insights from these and other writers to make sense of the gringo-local encounters in San Andrés. Tracing the ways that gringo identities emerge, in discourse and in practice, is crucial to understanding the political implications of gringo visits to San Andrés and to envisioning how such privileged positions might be practiced differently.

Much of the political baggage that is invoked by gringo presence in San Andrés is deeply connected to relatively recent histories of white western imperialism in Guatemala, especially involving the U.S. (although recently Canadian multinational mining corporations too have become an increasingly unwelcome and imperialist presence in many parts of the country). As I will point out later in chapter three, the term “gringo” often, though not always, carries a connotation of U.S. American-ness that is inseparable from such histories.

A particularly infamous historical example of U.S. imperialism in Guatemala is the CIA-sponsored coup that ended the period of progressive social reform known as the “Guatemalan spring” in 1954. The roots of this episode can be traced back the ascent to power of the United Fruit Company, a U.S.-based multinational corporation, under the dictatorship of Guatemalan president Jorge Ubico from 1931-1944. During this period, the United Fruit Company expanded operations to become the largest and most powerful

corporate entity in Guatemala, controlling most of the productive agricultural lands in the country much to the detriment of many poor and landless Guatemalans (Schlesinger & Kinzer, 1982). Ubico's dictatorship was eventually overthrown by a group of dissident Guatemalan military officers who had grown weary of the president's pro-U.S. stance. Juan José Arévalo won the presidency democratically in 1945, thus marking the beginning of the "Guatemalan spring", a period of social reform that featured the promotion of free speech, unionization, land redistribution, and the formation of new political parties. Arévalo was succeeded in 1951 by president Jacobo Arbenz, who continued his predecessor's agenda of progressive politics. Under the government's agrarian reform campaign that was carried out in 1953, the United Fruit Company stood to lose a great deal of its considerable land holdings in Guatemala, many of which were not being used for cultivation at the time. The Guatemalan government offered compensation that was equal to the value that the corporation had declared in its tax assessments. The United Fruit Company had fraudulently under-calculated the value of its land holdings in order to minimize taxes, however, and was not prepared to let their lands go without a fight (Schlesinger & Kinzer, 1982). Taking advantage of the company's close ties with U.S. Congress, representatives of the United Fruit Company successfully lobbied the McCarthyist Eisenhower administration to overthrow the Arbenz government in a CIA-orchestrated coup in 1954 that was carefully framed as a crucial battle against a growing communist threat. The anti-communist rhetoric of U.S. foreign policy at the time obscured the blatantly imperialist motives of the U.S. government, which directly and forcefully interfered with a sovereign nation's political functioning as a means of protecting U.S.-American corporate interests.

In later decades, the injustice of further U.S. involvement in and exacerbation of armed conflicts in Guatemala (the genocidal “civil war” 1960-1997) and elsewhere in Central America (such as the Salvadoran civil war from 1980-1992 and the Nicaraguan Contra war from 1970-1987), was not lost on Latin Americans and twentieth century U.S. imperialism undoubtedly colours contemporary usage of the term “gringo”. Many Latin American military personnel who have served U.S. imperialist interests abroad and been involved in the violent suppression of democratic social movements in the region were trained on U.S. soil at the School of the Americas (Sundberg 2007). Though current-day U.S. imperialism towards Guatemala and other Latin American countries has arguably taken on a more subtle and economic character compared its overt military heyday during the Cold War years, violent imperialism continues to be an undeniable aspect of U.S. policy towards Latin America as long as the School of the Americas remains in operation and its torture-trained pro-U.S. graduates continue to hold positions of power.

It was on my initial trip to San Andrés in 1997 that I learned about Central American history and U.S. imperialism for the first time. I was shocked in learning about U.S. involvement in violence the region and began to question why it was that I had never heard anything about this imperialism during my many years of Canadian schooling. It seemed to me then that many local people in San Andrés were much more intimately acquainted with such histories than myself and the other gringos in town at the time. I recall and kept a travel diary record of some of the conversations with locals about history and politics from this first trip (especially conversations that I had with my patient and deeply politicized Spanish teacher); discussions that would make up my earliest education about the asymmetries of North-South relations in the Americas.



Figure 2: Map of central Petén including San Andrés, San José, and Flores

Gringos have been coming to San Andrés for a long time and their presence in town now is certainly nothing new. According to my mother-in-law, whose family has lived in San Andrés for several generations, gringo tourists, researchers, development workers, and purchasers of forest products often came in and out of town throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but their presence was not exactly an everyday reality. In the early 1990s, however, the quantity of gringos coming to town and purpose of their visits changed quite dramatically. In April 1993, the *Eco-escuela de español* [“Spanish Eco-school”] first opened its doors to gringos looking to study Spanish. The idea for the school was hatched in the offices of Pro-Petén, a local subsidiary of the U.S.-run NGO Conservation International, as a community development project designed to ease the economic dependence of San Andreseños on forest products. Pro-Petén provided training for locals who wanted to either work as Spanish teachers or host gringo students in their

homes. They also paid to advertise and promote the school in the United States. The school quickly gained in popularity and by the time I first arrived to study Spanish there in 1997, enrollment was at least 25 students at any given time, and occasionally it would reach as high as 50. In a small town like San Andrés, which is home to approximately 6000 people, this represented a marked increase in the number of gringo bodies. The school also fostered a new, closer kind of gringo-local encounter in local family homes; before the school and its homestay system were established, most gringo visitors to San Andrés were based in hotels across the lake in Flores (see figure 2), and would come to town – whether for business or pleasure – as a day trip. The school remains in operation today, though its numbers have significantly dwindled. During my fieldwork for this thesis, there were usually only about five students studying there at a time, and some weeks there were none.

A second gringo-recruiting initiative was inaugurated in town in 2000 and is now the primary source of gringo visitors to San Andrés. Volunteer Petén is an NGO that was created by a former U.S. Peace Corps worker who had finished serving his two-year term in San Andrés and wanted to continue his project. The centerpiece of Volunteer Petén is a reforested ecological preserve that sits just on the outskirts of town. The preserve is leased from the municipal government in San Andrés and was set up by Volunteer Petén to showcase the ecological diversity of the region and to educate local people about conservation (as it is defined and theorized from a distinctly U.S. perspective). [For in-depth and thoughtful discussions of conservation politics in Petén involving local and U.S. American actors, see Sundberg 1998, 2004, and 2006]. Most volunteers who come to San Andrés work in the preserve doing maintenance duties – keeping weed species at



bay, ensuring that walking trails are clear of debris, and repairing the many kilometers of fencing that surround the preserve. Volunteer Petén also runs a community library that is open to the public every evening. Volunteers are encouraged to come to the library after dinner and interact with local children by reading to them, playing card games, and conversing. The NGO also places interested volunteers in local schools to teach English. During the months of my fieldwork, the main focus of Volunteer Petén was the building of a three-classroom preschool in town. With materials and funds donated from the municipal government, other foreign NGOs, and individual donors in the U.S., a small army of rotating gringo volunteers built the school under the guidance of three salaried local builders. The building was made entirely of cinderblock and concrete and the work was often quite physically-demanding, perhaps especially so given the sweltering heat and humidity of the region. Working at this building site and visiting the library at night provided me with the opportunity to meet volunteers and to see first-hand how they talked about, embodied, and practiced their goals of “helping” and their identities as gringos. Like at the *Eco-escuela*, gringos who come to San Andrés in association with Volunteer Petén live, sleep, and eat in homestays with local families. Unlike at the *Eco-escuela*, however, volunteers do not usually study Spanish during their stay, and often are not able to communicate with their families beyond a few basic phrases. Besides the worksites of Volunteer Petén and the classrooms of the *Eco-escuela*, the place in San Andrés where gringos are perhaps most likely to be found is at the lakeside “gringo beach”. As the nickname would suggest, this is a popular gringo spot for afternoon swims and also for nighttime bonfire parties cum raucous drinking sessions.

Of the forty-one people that I interviewed for this research, twenty-nine were in San Andrés to work with Volunteer Petén and ten were Spanish students studying at the *Eco-escuela de español*. I also interviewed the directors of both organizations. The fact that I conducted the participant observation aspects of my research with Volunteer Petén gringos means that it is largely their experiences, and less so those of *Eco-escuela* students, that informs this research. Because of the volunteer development projects that Volunteer Petén conducts, ideas about “helping” were often intertwined with ideas about gringo-ness among many of my research participants.

In the pages that follow, I discuss my methodological, theoretical, and empirical aspects of my work in San Andrés. In chapter two I consider some the insights of feminist methodologies with respect to my own research practice. I consider my positionality, research methods, choice of who to study, and personal investments in this project, and suggest that who we are is never separate from what we see. Over the course of my fieldwork, I came to see my research practice as particularly contingent. Research was always inextricably embedded in “everyday life” and involved far more people, places, ideas, and baggage than I ever would have imagined. It is not produced by a researcher alone, but rather emerges as a co-creation among multiple different actors. In chapter two, I trace the relational emergence of my identity as “researcher” and my participants as “researched” in a way that will parallel chapter three’s emphasis on relationality between “gringo” and “local” identities. In both cases, these relationships are fraught with power dynamics that belie easy assertions of innocence from gringos and researchers alike.

Chapter three traces the making and negotiation of gringo identities in the “contact zone” of San Andrés, emphasizing that such identities carry considerable political weight. I ask how these identities come into being and how they are reproduced, in order to think through how they might also be practiced differently. I posit that there are multiple racialized, gendered, and classed power asymmetries woven into “gringo”; and even though they can be hard for gringos to see, such inequalities continue to matter a great deal in terms of the personal and political consequences of gringo visits. Many of these inequalities are inextricably bound up with the imperialist undertones of the “helpful” volunteer projects carried out in town; where San Andrés is positioned as in need of help, and gringos as happy to oblige. I trace gringo-ness in practice and find some sticky, whitened, and self-affirming patterns began to emerge.

In the conclusion, I discuss the adoption of a critical “gringo” identity as a potential tool of politicization and decolonization. I look at gringo-ness in terms of its emancipatory methodological, theoretical, and practical possibilities for gringos and San Andreseños alike. I ask how “gringo” might be destabilized and practiced differently, and what new patterns and possibilities might follow as a consequence. I caution that gringo politicization needs to be framed in terms of self-liberation rather than as a “helpful” act only beneficial to Others in order to avoid reinscribing the familiar gringo volunteer self-images of “helper” and “saviour”.

Over the course of writing up my research, I’ve stumbled across some terminology issues that are worth mentioning here. The first, and perhaps most significant terminology concern that I’ve had has to do with the word “gringo”. I’ve imported and Anglicized the Spanish term in my writing, but remain troubled by the gendered

implications of using this masculinized version of the word to refer to both men and women. “Gringa” refers only to women, while “gringo” can mean men or a group of mixed gender. I am disturbed by the sexism embedded in such language conventions, but have chosen to remain true to how the word “gringo” is actually deployed in San Andrés by both gringos and locals alike. I’ve also imported the Spanish term “San Andreseño” to refer to a local person living in San Andrés. It perhaps bears repeating that this too is a masculinized version of the word, making it similarly problematic to “gringo”.

In trying to name the ways that gringo positionality is never separate from the ever-present histories of North American and European invasions and impositions, I find myself waffling between “imperialism/imperialist” and “(neo)colonialism/colonialist”. Kaplan (1993) and Joseph (1998) both argue that it is particularly important to stress that the U.S. has indeed occupied an imperialist stance vis-à-vis Latin America, as a way of resisting uncritical historical fantasies of the United States as a country whose history is free of such conceit. While it is technically the case that only European powers have occupied a precisely “colonialist” stance in the region (in terms of officially establishing colonies there), I use the two phrasings somewhat interchangeably, partly because gringos hail from both North America (imperialist) and Europe (neocolonialist), and partly because I think the way that they play out is very similar among gringos: it bespeaks an attitude of superiority and/or entitlement with long historical roots.

Finally, I have used pseudonyms throughout for all of the research participants. The only exception is when I mention my husband Walter, who gave permission for his name to be used.

## 2. Privileging Practice and Practicing Privilege: Making Research

The ways that research is practiced and theorized are never separate from the kinds of knowledges that it produces. In this chapter, I outline arguments about positionality and research practice with a consideration of how they serve my broader theoretical goals of making gringo identities visible and open to interrogation. I don't feel that I can responsibly investigate the power dynamics at work in gringo-local encounters without also recognizing the ways that power dynamics shape the research process itself. In ways very similar to productions of "gringo" and "local", identities of "researcher" and "researched" emerge relationally through practice and are always differently weighted in terms of power. Research and gringo-ness are both rife with politics, and my approach here suggests that both kinds of practices need be critically investigated.

Discussions of researcher positionality have been of great interest to many feminist academics, and feminist geographers have been no exception. Since the publication of Donna Haraway's ground-breaking essay, "Situated Knowledges" (1988), many feminist geographers have engaged with and enriched the idea that the production of knowledge is never as neutral, objective, or complete as is often claimed (Rose 1997, Sundberg 2003, Sundberg 2005, Pratt 2004, England 2002, Valentine 2002). The multiple and changing social positions that are occupied by researchers lead to questions, methods, and findings that are inevitably *partial*, in both senses of the word; our research is always coloured by who we are and our view always limited by where we are standing.

Positionality pioneer Sandra Harding (2004) suggested that making our social positioning and the partiality of our claims known to our audience are part of the very preconditions for what she terms “strong objectivity”. In contrast, Gillian Rose (1997) has suggested that our social positioning cannot be known in its entirety, and is therefore impossible to disclose. She argues that claiming to fully know our own position problematically implies both a fixed identity and the capacity for a total view of it. The assumption that we can reveal our own positionality is, as Rose argues, another version of what Haraway has famously called the ‘god-trick’. Rose explains:

Thus positioning is not understood in terms of a conscious agent who encounters their context, including other agents, through a landscape surrounding them. Instead, it is implied that the identity to be situated does not exist in isolation but only through mutually constitutive social relations, and it is the implications of this relational understanding of position that makes the vision of a transparently knowable self and world impossible. (314)

She instead advocates that as researchers we pay particular attention to moments of “slippage”, acknowledging gaps in meaning that are opened up when diverse knowledges interact during research and differences are produced. “The feminist task becomes less one of mapping difference – assuming a visible landscape of power with relations between positions ones of distance between distinctly separate agents – and more one of asking how difference is constituted, of tracing its destabilizing emergence during the research process itself” (313). Because our performances of identity (Butler 1993) vary depending on where we are and who we are with, Rose advocates emphasizing the production of the researcher’s own identity in relation to others as a subject of research as well: “[R]esearch is seen as constitutive (if not completely so), both of the researcher and

of the others involved in the research process... What we research is our relation with the researched (Rose 1997: 315-6).

Geraldine Pratt (2004) puts these suggestions into practice by paying particular critical attention to her own “research performance” in her collaborative work with Filipina domestic workers in Vancouver. By carefully analyzing her role as researcher – her choices, preferences, and discomforts – she finds that potential political tools came to light. Paying attention to the ways we practice research is intimately related to broader political consequences. As Pratt explains “[T]heoretical contemplation and research practice are interdependent... Some research performances open opportunities for rethinking both theory and epistemology...” (193).

In my own research on gringo politics in San Andrés, I came to see that much of what was left off of my interview transcripts – what Pratt calls “the now of research” (192) – was crucial to understanding both the interview as a co-authored production and the relational emergence of my identity as interviewer. My transcriptions failed to capture the ways that body language, our “baggage”, the setting, and especially the “vibe” between us, all influenced what participants and I said. Paying attention to the performative aspects of research complicates the idea that it is something that we record, and instead suggests it is something we produce. A researcher is not so much a gatherer of data as she is a co-creator of it. This is particularly significant for my own research context given the occasionally contentious responses to my interview questions. My status as co-creator does not mean that I condone or agree with all interview responses; but at the same time, the identity I performed and the ways I asked my questions did open a space for imperialist views to be expressed on occasion. Even though they troubled me

at times, I was never entirely separate from my interviewees, their performances, and their responses. In my research, this realization shed an uncomfortable light on my own involvement in some of the processes that I sought to critique. Part of my hope for this chapter is that I can put into practice Pratt's assertion that, "If the performative aspect of our research lies unexamined, there is no opportunity to consider alternative research performances in order to weigh the extent to which they reiterate or subvert cultural norms" (192). The ways we practice research are never separate from our ever-changing position in the world, the theories we craft, and the political implications of what we claim.

The production of knowledge is a deeply political process where the stakes are not the same for everyone involved. A lot of ethnographic research focuses on groups of people who occupy "marginalized" positions (at least in relation to researchers). The risks that research can justify or exacerbate marginalized positions are very real and are not usually something that is under participants' control. Furthermore, these same research risks are rarely borne by researchers (though autoethnography and some collaborative projects could be an exception), who are likely to have little at stake in terms of the political implications of their research. Most academics retain the same (or accrue an even greater) degree of academic privilege when their research has ended. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that white western research on indigenous people, for instance, has operated as yet another tool of empire and has been of little benefit to those researched. Though she does not limit her critique to ethnography – the method that I claim to employ in this project – she does point out that the discipline of anthropology



has been particularly focused on carving out a niche of studying indigenous people, and making such study the trademark of its particular kind of “science” (11).

Haraway (1988) has shed light on the problems of how research conducted in western academic circles has relied on fallacies of objectivity, neutrality, and totalizing vision to produce the kinds of research that Smith criticizes. Feminist alternatives to such “god-trick” research have been diverse. While some scholars have opted to engage with the problematic politics of fieldwork to develop alternative models such as collaborative research frameworks (e.g. Pratt, 2004), still others have opted to choose as their subject of study the very position of whitened privilege that is usually left unremarked in such research endeavors (e.g. Guthman, 2008). In different ways, such methodologies seek to interrogate and ultimately diminish the power imbalances that exist between researchers and the people who are the subjects of their research. Methodological approaches that ignore such power dynamics risk (re)producing knowledges that can ultimately – if unintentionally – be detrimental to the people and places they research.

As renowned scholar Edward Said argued in *Orientalism* (1979), much of the knowledge produced in the West about the Orient has served to position it as inferior and Other to an implicit western benchmark. He argues that many derogatory Orientalist claims reveal more about western anxieties and self-imaginings than they do about the “Orient” itself. Past and present colonialisms continue to haunt much western research, and often in ways that are more visible to those who are positioned as Other. As Haraway points out “[T]here is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful” (Haraway, 1988: 583). While it is crucial not to essentialize all marginalized groups of people as having an automatic ability to articulate

and explain the oppression that they face, a marginalized standpoint often means having considerable experience with how power and privilege play out in everyday life.

Privilege can be hard to see when you have it working in your favor. The findings of my own research project, as elaborated in subsequent chapters, reinforce this idea, and below I will expand on some of the specifically methodological consequences of power and privilege in the practice of my research in San Andrés.

### **Research Politics in Practice**

I will relate the above-mentioned ideas about the politics of research and positionality to my own project in three ways. First I begin by sharing some of my own personal connections to San Andrés and to the politics of gringo positioning there, suggesting some of the reasons why conducting research in this context often painfully “hit close to home”. I mention my history in San Andrés not because it will render me or my project transparent, but because my previous experiences as a gringa in town have inevitably shaped the kinds of research questions that I ask, even as the nature of such connections are never fully visible to me. Though they are not knowable in their entirety, the effects of my personal connections on my project are politically significant. As

Juanita Sundberg (2005: 17) points out:

To focus on the geographer as a producer of knowledge is not to advocate the kind of navel gazing so abhorrent to many scholars. Rather, it is an effort to call attention to and critically assess how the geographer’s embodied social position and geographic location inform the production of knowledge about and representations of Latin American people and nature.

Secondly, I would like to explore the interviews that I conducted with research participants in greater detail. The interviews provided grounded insight into gringo

experiences in San Andrés, but interviews also helped me to understand that research performances produce data that are always co-created, often blurring the line between researcher and researched (Rose 1997, Pratt 2004). Initially, I assumed that interviews would provide a momentary detachment from “everyday life” and allow participants to explain and reflect on their connections to San Andrés from a distance. Instead, the interviews were completely inseparable from the messiness of everyday life. Deafening rainstorms, raised eyebrows, technical difficulties, awkward misunderstandings, alcohol, disagreement, getting hit on, and many more adventures all cut into the would-be tidiness of every interview, shaping what was said.

Finally, I will elaborate on why the politics of who we choose to study, and how, matters a great deal to what we find. My choice to make gringos – and not San Andreseños – the subjects of this project was very deliberate. This was inspired by my aim to conduct “critical” geographical research, defined by Sundberg (2005: 18) as “self-consciously wedding political goals with academic interventions, stressing the connections between power and knowledge, and advocating self-reflexivity.” For me, critical geography is one that calls into question the power of western researchers to identify suitable “subjects” in people who are more marginalized than themselves. I therefore hope to open the privileged position of gringo to interrogation with an eye to how such privilege might be dismantled, diminished, or at the very least, how it might be practiced in ways that are more empowering to locals.

### **Gringa Positionality**

Being a gringa and having personal links to San Andrés means that I have much at stake in pursuing this study. The politics of gringo positioning is a subject that has

strong personal implications for me. I first came to San Andrés in 1997 to study Spanish at the *Eco-escuela de español*, fresh out of high school and looking for a new experience. I did not know then that San Andrés would be the place where I would meet my future husband, Walter, and eventually build a home. My connections to the town have been and continue to be an integral part of who I am today, even though these connections can also sometimes be troubling. I am uneasy with the gringa privileges that have come to light for me in San Andrés, even though these same privileges have made things easier, and have facilitated my making a life there in the first place.

It was on that initial trip that my mind opened for the first time to the neocolonial underpinnings of global inequalities and to my previously-uninterrogated position as a white middle-class western woman. In particular, I was acutely aware that my gender, my whiteness and my foreignness (in a word, my gringa-ness) signified differently than at home and affected the ways that I was read by locals and other tourists alike. At the end of my trip, I learned a hard lesson about the power to travel when Walter applied for a Canadian tourist visa and was denied. Until that point, I had never realized how many barriers impede Guatemalan mobility compared to the easy tourist mobility of so many western visitors to the country. Walter was subsequently denied two more visas (for Mexico and the U.S.) over the next few years, and this experience in large part inspired my interview question of “Why is it easier for us gringos to come here than it is for people from San Andrés to visit our hometowns?” I wanted to understand how gringos explained this inequality, even as they were already enacting it by their very presence in town. Part of my interest in the topic of gringo politics stems from a personal desire to continually interrogate and decolonize my own ties to San Andrés. I was drawn to this

project in part because I anticipated the possibility for things to “hit close to home” in ways that could make the research somewhat autoethnographic.

Mary Louise Pratt’s (1992: 7) use of the term “autoethnography” refers to a practice employed by colonized subjects to “talk back to” European representations of Others. It involves counter-narratives and self-representations that can subvert colonialist portrayals, even as it also engages with colonizing terms and idioms. She describes it as a strategy that colonized people might use to respond to the knowledges that are produced about them. Given the importance of this political connotation, it would be a misleading appropriation of the term to claim that my project is autoethnographic in the way Pratt describes. After all, my focus is on gringos – a privileged group that has not historically been dehumanized by western knowledge produced about them, as have many colonized people. Neither have gringos been marginalized and inferiorized by the practice of ethnographic representation, the kind of research that I’m engaging in here. On the contrary, I would assume that many of the imperialist ethnographic studies that have taken place in Latin America have been conducted at the hands of those who could fall into the very category of “gringo”. I therefore hesitantly invoke “autoethnography” not for its significant subversive political potential, but merely because I as a researcher position myself as a member of the group I investigate. I am not only studying “other people”, I am studying a position that I myself often occupy. Along with my research participants, I too am personally and continually living my own research questions about the politics of being a gringo in San Andrés. What’s more, I also carry the baggage and benefits of years of having such politics “working” on me and my relationship to San

Andrés. This personal history affects every aspect of how I perform, theorize, embody, and experience my gringa-ness and my research.

While I share similar economic and racialized positions with other gringos in the context of San Andrés, it is important to stress that these are not essential identity positions that we share to the same extent everywhere. Two Latino volunteers from Costa Rica and Colombia, two South Koreans, and a handful of people of colour from the U.S. were all put in the same racialized category of “gringo” as the white, European-descendant volunteers like me. Though we occupied similar positions of “whitened foreign-ness” while in San Andrés, in my home country of Canada it’s highly unlikely that we all would have been imagined as sharing the same racialized identity. As I will further elaborate in the chapter that follows, we occupy our gringo positions largely in relation to San Andreseños; gringo is not a fixed identity that we carry with us in all places at all times. So while I think it’s fair to claim a certain kind of (albeit depoliticized) autoethnographic quality to my study of gringos, it must also be stressed that these are not people with whom I share a static and permanent identity. Our similarities – having money for leisure travel, speaking English amongst ourselves, holding powerful passports that do not require visitor’s visas for travel, etc. – all came to light in relation to local people, most of whom did not have access to these things. Yet this gringo identity that we shared in San Andrés would instantly dissolve in many other contexts where other economic, racialized, and nationality differences among us could take precedence. Identity is not a predetermined given. It emerges in relation to the people, places, histories, and situations around us. I therefore can claim to share identity positions with the gringos from my study at some times and in some places only.

I offer reflections on my positionality and personal investments in this project as a way of suggesting that they have inevitably informed the claims that I will make. For me, sharing some of my messier moments of gringa positioning is a necessary part of taking seriously the feminist methodological discussions outlined at the beginning of this chapter, putting into practice a responsible and self-consciously partial approach to practicing and performing research.

When my husband and I arrived in San Andrés to start my fieldwork, I found it remarkably easy for me to “slip into” the gringo clique that was already established in town. I had imagined that I would have to explain myself and my research to everyone from the moment I arrived; instead no one batted an eyelash when I told them what I was there to do. Saldanha (2007) argues that privileged white tourist bodies tend to stick together in exclusionary – if also subtle and unconscious – ways when traveling in spaces of Otherness. The connection that he makes between unreflexive cliquish tendencies and whiteness amongst the tourists in studied in Anjuna, India, has helped me to theorize why it appeared self-evident that I, as a white Canadian woman, would gravitate towards this group. Eyebrows were only raised when, during my turn “under the microscope” as a newcomer to the clique (I was asked the standard first-day-on-the-job questions: where are you from? how long will you be here? how well-traveled are you? what’s your story? etc.), I said my husband was from San Andrés. Walter’s integration into the group was not as smooth as my own. While he didn’t work alongside us during the day, he often joined us in restaurants and bars to socialize at night. Some people in the group ignored him outright, while others asked him questions like “What do you think of Canada?” as though he had just visited Canada for the first time rather than having lived and worked

there for years. Other awkward questions included: “Are you happy there?” and “Do you miss your life here?”

Even though such questions were intended as friendly conversation, to me they also served to set boundaries that defined him as something of an outsider in the group. These were not the kinds of questions gringos usually asked each other. I think Walter occupied a tenuous status as “local” in many gringos’ minds, and I was often frustrated and occasionally offended by the ways that locals were talked about or talked to in gringo circles. There were a few running “inside jokes” about locals that some gringos would laugh about (in English) even when hanging out with local people who had no idea what they were talking about. One had to do with nick-naming teenage boys and young men “double-sexy” when they lifted their shirts to cool off while working or playing sports. This happened a lot in town, where it’s very hot but going shirtless in public can be considered inappropriate. The joke was coined by a gringa who noticed that boys lifted their shirts right to the nipple line, thus revealing both nipples for “double the sexiness”. I remember feeling particularly embarrassed one day at the volunteer site when a 50-something year old local worker, José, lifted his shirt to cool off and was dubbed “double-sexy”. Some of the gringos erupted in laughter while José smiled good-naturedly but looked nonetheless confused. While this example may seem harmless, I felt that jokes like “double-sexy” served to ridicule local people and reinforced gringo ways of behaving as being if not the “norm”, at least less laughable. Again, it enforced a boundary between “us” and “them”. For this and other reasons, the gringos were not necessarily a group that I was entirely comfortable aligning myself with.



Another reason I was uneasy was the fact that locals had a few inside jokes of their own, and I was wary of being laughed at. I have heard local people mock gringos for things like swimming in their underwear, for getting visibly drunk in the middle of the day, for not speaking Spanish properly, for smelling funny, for having terrible dancing skills, and for throwing around seemingly endless supplies of cash. I worried that this mockery might be applied to the gringos as a whole group – even though it was usually only a select few who blatantly violated social norms in San Andrés – and I often wanted to distance myself. What bothered me most were the highly gendered allegations of being sexually promiscuous and lacking cooking skills that I heard levied against some of the gringos in our group. When I heard gringos making fun of locals, I felt trapped between the loyalty I felt towards friends and family who live in San Andrés, and the need to hang out with gringos in order to conduct research. When locals would mock gringos, on the other hand, I felt caught between feeling self-defensive of myself and the other gringos, and feeling relief that the fact I was privy to such conversations in the first place must mean I was “a different kind of gringa”, one that was allowed to be in on the joke.

During fieldwork, I felt the differences and misunderstandings between these two groups much more acutely than I usually do when visiting San Andrés, when I spend almost all my time with my in-laws. Late one night I was driving home with my mother-in-law when we were flagged down by Eric and Jennifer who were hoping to catch a ride. They had clearly been drinking and when they approached the passenger window to talk to us, my mother-in-law was startled. She seemed afraid and when they were getting into the car, and whispered to me “My goodness! Why are they dressed all in black like that?”. I knew that she considered such behaviour strange and I felt badly for putting her

in an uncomfortable position. A similar situation also occurred driving with my father-in-law. On a particularly hot day I offered a ride to two gringos, one of whom was not wearing a shirt. When my father-in-law greeted them and introduced himself they smiled but did not return his introduction or shake his hand. I don't think they intended to be rude, as they were both quite shy; but their actions (including lack of shirt out in public) would have been considered disrespectful to most people in San Andrés, my father-in-law included. While I was conducting fieldwork, I often worried that my San Andreseño friends and family would think badly of me for flossing around town so much with what was often perceived of as an out-of-line group. As I explained to Harriet about myself during her interview: "I care about what people think, sometimes too much. Here I'm always hyper-aware of what message I'm sending out... What am I saying about myself if I do this or that?" I worried about my reputation among locals and being associated more than ever with the both privileged and mocked identity of "gringo". Three months into my research, I came to dread hanging out with gringos and found myself coming up with more and more excuses to stay at home from the worksite and spend more time with my in-laws.

Though I can't claim to know everything about how these concerns could have coloured my research, I think it's fair to speculate that my self-consciousness as a gringa is an important part of why I see it as an identity position worthy of interrogation, even critique. While I will always be considered a gringa when I go to San Andrés, my project made me realize that my main allegiance does not lie with the people who share this identity with me. I could relate to the following quotation from the fieldnotes of Allaine

Cerwonka, who mentions having similar feelings during her doctoral fieldwork, which investigated politicized and racialized struggles over Australian national identity:

... I don't feel 'at home' here this time around. I think part of it is a result of constantly being a bit out of my element. What I mean is that I spend most of my time with people and in places that don't necessarily reflect my values or direct interests. And, although I am sincere with the people with whom I spend my time, I am less bold in my opinions and in general exercise my personality a little less than I might if I weren't conducting research at the same time. I find that this actually limits my attachment to this place, interestingly enough. I think the most taxing thing for me about fieldwork (well, one of them) is not getting my worldview reflected back to me and therefore validated in a way that it is when I spend time with people whose interests or lifestyles are more similar to mine (2007: 139).

My frustration with spending so much time with other gringos, who often did not reflect my same worldview, showed up in my own fieldnotes:

...I feel like a bit of a fake though, a lot of the reason that I want to hang out is to secure interviews and to try to remember stuff that people say and do for fieldnotes. I often find myself being nice to people who drive me nuts and keeping my mouth shut when people say offensive things.... When I see other new gringos around, I feel a contradictory and mixed reaction. Part of me wants to introduce myself, find out what their deal is, what they think. The other part wants to ignore them completely, wishes they weren't even here at all...

Along with everyone else, I am partial. As are the knowledges I produce. I do not claim to be capable of revealing the full extent of what this partiality means for my research, other than I know I can access only a small part of an impossibly vast story. I come to this project with a critical – but not entirely unsympathetic – eye towards the complexities of being a gringo in San Andrés. The criticism that I have for the imperialist underpinnings of gringo politics is not only directed at “other” gringos, I take it to heart myself in the hope of forging a different kind of “being gringo” – for myself and the

volunteers in San Andrés, and for countless other gringos elsewhere in Latin America too.

### **Interview Influences**

My positionality permeates every aspect of my research design, and the methods through which I chose to gather data are no exception. Interviews were not the only means through which I studied gringos in San Andrés, but they did provide particularly obvious examples of how I as a researcher was never separate from the data I produced. Most of the interviews that I conducted were one-on-one, although some people opted to be interviewed in groups of two, usually along with a person they were living or travelling with. I greatly enjoyed conducting interviews and found them to be welcome relief from some of the more laborious aspects of my fieldwork. Sitting down out of the blazing sunshine with a cool drink and a voice recorder felt infinitely more comfortable than the physically-demanding work at the volunteer site, for example. At the worksite, even though everyone knew I was conducting research, I often felt sneaky and awkward for jotting down notes on what people said and did. In interviews, on the other hand, I knew my voice recorder was catching every word, so I felt I didn't need to strain to remember as many details. I got to relax a little bit, especially compared to the person being interviewed. It seemed so much easier to sit back and listen than to be the person answering the questions. Initially, I felt that my task was merely to start (and keep) people talking. And then smile and nod. And I did an awful lot of smiling and nodding, even though sometimes people said things that offended me.

At the time, I tried to suspend my impulse to contradict statements that I didn't agree with and to allow my role as "listener" to open my mind to different perspectives. Since I wasn't busy composing a response in my head, as I might have done in a more conversational setting, I found myself to be more understanding and to have more empathy for what people said. I described this feeling in my fieldnotes:

I also wanted to mention the idea of listening in interviews and just quieting my mind's kind of natural impulse to come up with a counter-argument to things that people are saying, especially in university classes. In interviews, I find that part of my brain is quiet and that I'm actually listening to what people are saying, even if it's something I completely disagree with. Since my goal isn't to convince them otherwise but to keep them talking about it, I really stretch my mind and open it and try to understand what they're saying and try to sort of agree with them, as a way to keep them talking. Although on the other hand, when people say stuff that's really problematic or really imperialist or really easy to pull apart and easy to disagree with, I find myself thinking "Yes! That's going to be so easy to deconstruct" or "I can't believe he said that, I'm going to jump on that in my thesis" and I do feel like it's kind of misleading because as they're saying these really problematic things, I'm kind of smiling and nodding so as not to interrupt their train of thought. Or am I misleading them into thinking that I agree? I don't know.

Weeks after completing my interviews, while I was listening to them again to transcribe them, I was often taken aback at some of the things I heard myself agreeing with, laughing at, or letting slide. The empathy or apathy that I might have felt at the moment of the original interview was often gone by the time I was transcribing the recordings. I felt that in some of the responses that I gave in interviews, I was not always being true to myself. Though painfully tedious at times, I found transcription to be a very illuminating process. It gave me a chance to revisit and remember interviews just a little bit differently the second time around. A lot more was going on in terms of my role as interviewer than what I had originally thought. To start with, my smiling and nodding was far from incidental or innocuous. It conveyed a sense of agreement, and looking

back, I think it encouraged people to pursue ideas that they may not have pursued had I acted differently, by, say, frowning. My body language as an interviewer, though erased from the record in typed interview transcripts, helped to shape what was said in important, though unfortunately almost untraceable, ways. This is but one small example of what Pratt (2004) refers to as the fleeting but significant, performative “now” of research. There was a lot of crucial stuff that the voice recorder could not catch.

In my later fieldnotes, I rather harshly referred to my smiles and nods as “sucking up” and “leading people on”. It was something that troubled me, even as I wasn’t sure how I could have changed it and still kept people talking. I can’t help wondering, now looking back, how much of this frustration was based on trying to live up to an impossible ideal of being a “detached” and “neutral” interviewer. I found Kim England’s comments helpful in reframing my “sucking up” as being instead a gesture of respect or even humility towards participants:

Several feminist geographers... write in favor of pursuing a supplicant relationship with the researched, and seeking reciprocal relationships based on empathy, mutuality and respect. The appeal of supplication lies in its potential for the researcher to cope with asymmetrical and potentially exploitative power relations in fieldwork. When I adopt the researcher-as-suppliant role, I expose my reliance on the researched, and emphasize that the knowledge of the researched is greater than that of myself (at least regarding the particular questions being asked). I approach fieldwork as a dialogical process constructed by myself and the researched; the interview becomes an evolving and co-authored conversation. (2002: 209)

England ties her supplication to both a dependence on, and an inevitable collaboration with, her research participants. In so doing, she helps me to re-theorize my smiley behaviour during interviews; instead of seeing it as an interference that muddles what people *really* think, it can be read as enacting an empathetic response during an always already co-created interview performance.

The questions I ask, the interview location I choose, the mood I'm in, the body language I display, the tone of my voice, my feelings towards the person I'm interviewing, and the kind of person that participants perceive me to be will all inevitably affect the answers that respondents provide. I don't think this means that I've misled participants *per se*, but rather that I too am responsible for and implicated in the data that was produced *with* those I interviewed. Their answers may not be my own, but I did set many of the conditions that facilitated their expression. As I'll elaborate below, the data for this project (and arguably the data for all social science inquiries) was co-created by many contributing factors, including (but not limited to) my participants and I.

During fieldwork, I began to compile a list of the ways that interviews were co-created by the ideas, assumptions, positions, and performances that participants and I brought to the table. Here are the factors that I identified as having shaped the interviews I conducted: the relationship between respondents and myself; previous group conversations on the topic of gringo politics; "group-think" and the opinions of other gringos; pressure to conform to preconceived ideas about what "research" should look like; the interview questions and the assumptions they contained; my own difficulty in answering the interview questions; the setting of the interview and what was going on around us. This list is by no means exhaustive; there are likely many more co-productions present in my interview performances than those that I was able to see and articulate.

### *Audience*

I had a history with everyone I interviewed, having worked and socialized alongside them before sitting down for the interview. The nature of our relationship and

the rapport we share – whether warm and friendly or hesitant and formal – is almost immediately apparent in interview transcripts. Our level of comfort and familiarity had a strong impact on the level of disclosure in interviews, the formality of the language we used, and also on the kinds of views we expressed. I worded questions differently depending on how well I knew the person I was interviewing; my behaviour was always informed by who my audience was. These changing degrees of rapport spring in large part from the fact that our respective identities during the interview were always relationally-constituted. Gender, age, race, nationality, sexuality, first language, and many more factors all served to position me in relation to everyone I interviewed. My identity is thus produced just a little bit differently with every research participant. Returning to Rose’s point, it is in this way that research is constitutive of both me and those I research in ways that render the idea of a fixed, *a priori* identity unthinkable.

I felt that participants also often tailored their responses specifically to me as their audience, whether their goal was one of seeking my agreement or one of sparking debate by trying to “stir the pot”. My research participants knew that I held San Andrés and its inhabitants in high esteem, and they knew I was married to Walter. Their responses often referenced this knowledge and the vast majority of participants seemed to want to foster a strong sense of agreement between us. During an answer, they would periodically “check-in” to gauge my level of concurrence by asking things like “Do you know what I mean?” or ending a statement with “I don’t know, what do you think?”

There were also times, however, that participants made controversial comments that were not necessarily intended to spark my immediate agreement, but rather were attempts to change my mind. In the following example, Dario mentions my connection to



San Andrés, thus bringing me into his answer, but then goes on makes denigrating comments that I disagree with. Here, he is frustrated that local people don't offer to volunteer at the worksite: "And you know, you know better than anyone, that, that some of these people spend their days... lying in the hammocks, at least half of the day. What if this half of the day, you work, you go and help your own community, building your... a school for *your kids*?!" Dario and I had already discussed this topic two days earlier while swimming at the beach, where I told him I thought most people were too busy in San Andrés to work extra hours without pay. Here, he tries again to convince me by directly engaging me in his response by saying, "you know better than anyone". Dario caters his answer specifically to me as his listener; who I am and what he knows about me are never separate from what he says. He already knew that I disagree with his observation that people in San Andrés are lazy. That he brings up the same subject yet again in the interview shows the ways that our previous conversation – though never explicitly referenced in the interview – helped set the groundwork for what how he would respond. It also shows something of the process whereby differences are made. Dario brings my position close to his own in claiming that he and I both "know" that San Andreseños spend half the day in their hammocks, a move that makes it much easier for him to go on to then position "them" as different from "us": lazy, unhelpful, etc. In this example, I try to trace the emergence of how difference is constituted during the interview with an eye to how I might have subverted it. I found Dario's interview a frustrating one to transcribe, as my head filled with things I wished I had said. Looking back, I think it would have been more ethical to refuse his attempt to position me as

someone who “knows” about San Andreseño laziness, and instead insist that what I’ve come to know is actually a very different story.

### *The Story*

Knowledge about San Andrés is continually being produced and negotiated by gringos through everyday practice. Casual conversations amongst gringos – where ideas about San Andrés are put forth and fine-tuned by the group – work their way into becoming part of a collective knowledge or “story” that is well-known (though not necessarily universally agreed upon) by the group, even if there may be some disagreement on certain aspects. This gringo-produced “story” places the town and its inhabitants in certain ways in relation to gringos and is an important element in how differences are constituted. Such knowledge is constantly being re-negotiated as new ideas, experiences, and opinions are integrated as different gringos come and go.

Below I cite an example from Rolando’s interview, where he details an experience that went on to become a small part of the collective group knowledge about San Andrés. Rolando came to volunteer in San Andrés from Costa Rica, and he mentions that he was initially surprised that people from San Andrés considered him a gringo at all:

Yeah, at the beginning, the people I spoke with took me for being a North American. But I told them ‘No, I speak Spanish, I’m Costa Rican’. I’ve also noticed that people aren’t really that well-oriented, geographically-speaking. A lot of them don’t know where Costa Rica is and that it’s in Central America and that we’re so close to each other. I mean, we’re only separated by two countries. But really, culturally, as I said, this is just like being in a small Costa Rican town away from the city. [translated from Spanish]

His surprise at the fact that many San Andreseños he met weren’t aware of their proximity to Costa Rica was something he shared with other gringos at the worksite. For

a time, Rolando's experience became integrated into the collective gringo "story" about San Andrés. His experience made an appearance in Teresa's interview, although I'm not sure she was aware that it originally came from Rolando. She never mentions where she heard it. I think by the time Teresa was interviewed, the idea that "San Andreseños don't know where Costa Rica is" was a trope that had been tossed around so many times that it had become canonized as common knowledge. Here's Teresa discussing the possibility of starting a scholarship fund for Guatemalans to study abroad:

You know, a scholarship foundation to get a kid from San Andrés to go, I don't know, wherever they want to go, even. You know and I think you wouldn't be able to do that. They don't, ha, they can't find, you know, Costa Rica on the map, but, ah, something like that would be really cool. And it's kind of a shame that there isn't already like an international foundation that's like that.

The connection between these two excerpts illustrates how interview responses are partly created by day-to-day conversations as personal experiences become somewhat collective property. Talking about San Andrés and "getting the story straight" as a group had an impact on what knowledges were shared in interviews. People were not so much sharing an individual perspective on San Andrés (if such a thing exists in the first place), but instead were often re-iterating collectively-produced stories about the town and the people who live there. Personal responses to my interview questions were therefore always coloured by the ideas and experiences of other gringos too.

### *Groupthink*

The idea of "groupthink" is closely related to the above-mentioned idea of a collectively-created "story" about San Andrés, shared and reiterated amongst gringos. The term was first coined by social psychologist Irving Janis to explain how the pressures

of working to build consent and minimize conflict in a group setting can lead members to make decisions uncritically or change their opinion in the interest of preserving group harmony. Here I use “groupthink” to think about the effect of group dynamics on gringo responses to my interview questions in particular. Though the term may carry a negative connotation, I’m less interested in whether groupthink is “good” or “bad” and more interested in how it works in terms of “getting the story straight”; I wish to use it for its descriptive power in articulating how knowledges come to be produced as co-creations.

After spending so much time with other volunteers, Betsey explains that it can be hard to decipher where one’s own ideas end and where groupthink ideas begin. She is speaking in response to my first interview question “How do you feel about your experience in San Andrés so far?”:

Let’s see... um, I don’t know, I... I guess... it’s been a good experience, I mean... it’s kind of hard to say what my experience has been cause sometimes you feed off of what other people are saying and a lot of people, especially with like Dario and his experience at the school, or bad experience at the school, um, he kind of... talking... He and Teresa have been talking a lot about how the town is just different and how they don’t seem to appreciate or have gratitude for anything. And like, I never really thought about it until they said that, so, and I don’t really agree with it, I mean I see where they’re coming from but it’s like, I don’t know.

I saw groupthink at work in many informal gringo group conversations, and almost every time that I interviewed two people together. In two-person interviews, if a difference of opinion started to emerge, one person would often start to back down and concede agreement with the other person. Above we see at least a small degree of concession from Betsey; although she doesn’t agree with Dario and Teresa, she is also careful to end on a gracious note by saying, “I see where they’re coming from, but...”. Throughout my fieldwork the overall group vibe amongst gringos was noticeably non-

confrontational and supportive; even when drinking was involved, preserving harmony seemed to be much higher priority than sparking debate.

The following example comes from an interview with Kielan and Lola, two siblings travelling together and studying Spanish in San Andrés. It provides a glimpse of groupthink unfolding in practice. Lola begins by expressing her frustration that the administrators at the Eco-escuela seemed to be after her money. When Kielan disagrees, she modifies her position:

L: I don't know, you can see it. Like, it's almost like everything they do is for money. Not completely for money, but I saw it sometimes where it just seemed like - I don't know, how do I say it without being rude, it doesn't sound nice. I mean there's just some cases where it was just like they would do something and it was just like make sure the money's there. And like a lot of things they would talk about is like we need more money, we need more money. To build the school and-

K: I've definitely been places that are a lot more overbearing than here though. They're a bit more relaxed about it. I mean some places you see them pushing everything on you. You know 'buy this, buy this, buy this'. Here it's a bit more relaxed.

L: It's nice here, like there's not markets and everything like that. So it's not constantly in your face, like, 'buy this'. You don't have to worry about any of that here.

Here I felt that they worked as a team to “get the story straight” about local desire for their money, though ultimately it was Lola who revised her initial statement and agreed with Kielan. Their exchange provides a glimpse at the process of knowledge being formed as a negotiated co-creation. A similar observation has been made by Geraldine Pratt (2002) in writing about focus group methodology:

Focus group methodology is premised on the notion that we develop knowledge in context and in relation to others. One of the claims that is made of focus groups is that they provide an opportunity to observe directly the process of meaning generation... In interviews, individuals tell us how they would behave or have behaved in certain circumstances; the promise of focus groups is that they provide a setting in which we observe how people behave and make sense of their world in relation to others. (215-16)

It is fitting that much of what she mentions above about meanings being generated in relation to others in focus group settings were best exemplified by the two-person interviews that I conducted, since having an additional participant did make such interviews into a small “focus group” of sorts. While I did get to see groupthink negotiations at work in everyday conversations as well, it was only in my two-person interviews that I have a transcript which I can then analyze. It would have been interesting to have taken more detailed fieldnotes on the ways that knowledges were collectively-produced in less formal and larger group settings as well.

There was at least one conversation in particular wherein I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall, and preferably one with a fly-sized voice recorder too. I was told by Monique that she had already heard what my interview questions were before sitting down with me. Apparently the idea of interviews generated considerable curiosity among gringos in town and one day, while hanging on the beach, someone who had already been interviewed recounted my interview questions to five gringos who had not yet been interviewed. In what follows, Monique explains that her interview is not the first time she’s heard my questions. The excerpt begins with me debriefing her on my confusing and long-winded final question:

Sarah: I’ve got a big doozie question that I ask at the end. And people are always like ‘what?’-

Monique: I already know what it is, actually.

S: Do you?

M: I forget kind of how she phrased it so you’re definitely going to have to repeat it. But, so this might kind of be biased ‘cause I’ve already thought about it. I don’t know what my answer’s going to be actually, until I say it I guess.

S: You’ve heard about the last question?

M: I don’t think she knew you were going to interview me, so...

S: It's a doozie, that's good, I'm glad you had time to think about this, you're going to have pearls of wisdom for me... Why is the world the kind of world where, you know, people who come to San Andrés as Spanish students for example, tend to be from like North America and Europe and it's unlikely that people from San Andrés would, you know, on vacation time, have the same opportunity to visit our home countries under the same circumstances. Why?

M: Yeah that is a tough, tough question.

S: Yeah...

M: And she kind of worded it differently when she said it to us. But uh...

S: How did she word it? I'm curious 'cause maybe there's a better way to word it.

M: She said something like, you said kinda at the beginning. We come here as tourists, as students, and learn the language and we take our, this is our vacation time. We take our vacation time to come here and learn about their culture and learn the language and you know come here to learn about this way of life. Why is it that people from San Andrés wouldn't do the same thing in America? Something like, around, something like that.

S: Oh no. Yeah, that's not-

M: That's not it?

S: Not what I wanted to ask. No.

M: But like, maybe I'm, now I'm probably- We're doing like telephone.

S: Yeah.

M: Now I'm wording it differently. It was probably more closer to how you said it but it's it was kind of like why people from Guatemala like, how did that originate. Like why are they in poverty kind of?

I have no way of knowing which participants already knew the questions and had perhaps formulated their responses in advance, but I find it very interesting to think about how such a group conversation about my interview questions would have unfolded and how it may have shaped people's answers. It's understandable that Monique would mention that knowing the question in advance could make her answer "biased", even though all interview responses are already "biased" and collaboratively-created to some degree already. And as Monique herself articulated above, the "now" of a research performance still matters: "I don't know what my answer's going to be actually, until I say it I guess." But I still wish I could have been present that day on the beach, when my

very interview questions were the fodder for a focus group-sized groupthink session. It would have been fascinating to see how groupthink worked its way into the conversation. Was there a consensus? What kinds of collectively-produced answers for my questions did they come up with?

Before moving on, I think it's also important to point out that the examples I've discussed in this section all have gendered dynamics at play. I've shown that Betsey and Lola, despite evidence that they held different opinions than others, both demonstrated a willingness to bend and accommodate different views. In the interview with Lola, it was Kielan's ideas that ended up becoming the consensus. It should come as no surprise that the interaction in this interview would be highly gendered; after all, research methods are not neatly separate from everyday practice. Both are deeply embedded in negotiations of power. Pratt (2002) reminds us, again speaking in the context of focus groups, that "status hierarchies do not disappear" and she cautions us to "...consider which voices might be silenced in a focus group setting" (226).

### *"Research"*

Most of the gringos who participated in my project had their own ideas about what research should look like. There were even a few who offered suggestions for how I might best conduct the research for this project. I found these moments particularly intriguing, as different sets of assumptions and their different implications came to light. But I confess that research advice from participants also generated anxiety for me. It made me doubt myself: Why are they telling me this? Do I really know what I'm doing? Am I doing a good job or do I need to change my approach? Did I do something to make



them doubt my abilities as a researcher? Interview responses are always informed by participants' preconceived ideas about what research, researchers, and research participants should look like. Suggestions and advice as to how to improve my research practice were not usually given in an explicit way, instead it was something implied quite subtly during the interview process. It's interesting that such advice was not really offered in any other situations. I think the "being under the microscope" feeling in an interview setting is perhaps what made some participants feel entitled to similarly question and probe the way I conducted my research.

But it was only some participants who felt entitled to do so, and this was by no means random. Here I again return to gender, a factor that undoubtedly shaped how, why, and when research advice was given, and by whom. Sundberg (2005) writes about her own experience of how gender inflected her role as researcher and the different degrees of legitimacy she was afforded by different audiences. She argues (2003) that the ways we are positioned by gender influences every aspect of our social interactions in the field – the way we can enter into them, the ways we participate in them, the ways we are read by others. In short, every research encounter is shaped by gender.

The three clearest and most blatant examples I have of advice being given to me during interviews all involve men as the research participants. These three men also happened to be among oldest three participants whom I interviewed. At the ages of 31, 40, and "early fifties", they were all older than me (I was 28 at the time), a fact that all three were aware of. I suspect that much of the reason they offered suggestions in the first place was because they had trouble seeing me as worthy of occupying the position of "researcher" that I was trying to claim. After all, as England (2002) explains, researchers

almost always hold a privileged position vis-à-vis their research participants: we are the ones who decide what to ask, when to move on, how to interpret data, and how to present findings. I can't help but think that my gender, and perhaps to a lesser extent my age, positioned me in their eyes as someone unworthy of holding these powers over them. On some level, I don't think I fit with their notions of what a "real researcher" looks like.

Of the three participants, there was one in particular whom I felt to be entirely dismissive of my project and its importance. In the other two examples, I didn't feel that the participants were frowning upon my project as a whole, but rather that they thought I wasn't conducting my interviews as efficiently as I could have been. In the following excerpt, Pete becomes somewhat frustrated that I paused at the end of a question to see if he was going to add more:

Pete: If I think of anything else, I'll uh... pipe in.

Sarah: Yeah, yeah, add in anytime...

P: I figure what we could do is just maybe go through the questions and then afterwards we can just free-form. That way you get your questions covered, if you want...

S: Do you want me to read them all you mean? Or just keep going down the list?

P: We could do... We'll just do one by one if you want and then...

S: Oh sure.

P: That way we get the questions done.

S: Yeah.

P: Cover your bases and then we can, I can do free-form afterwards.

S: Sure...

At the beginning of every interview, I made a point of telling participants that the purpose of the questions was to serve as a rough guide only and that they were free to mention ideas not directly addressed in the questions. I was interested in what participants, in their own words, deemed to be the most interesting or difficult aspects of their experience in San Andrés. Some of the most relevant personal reflections I heard

were not accessed directly through the interview questions, but instead came about as participants wandered “off-topic” or when they expanded on an idea that they had mentioned to me previously, outside of the interview setting. I encouraged participants to talk about whatever they deemed relevant, even if it did not directly correspond to a question I had asked them. Pete was not alone in finding this strategy somewhat annoying. Another participant, Derek, also at one point intervened during his interview, saying “Okay, okay, let’s get back to the questions”. For both of these men, the interview was not proceeding in a way that made sense or felt comfortable for them. In that regard, I’m glad they spoke up and further made the interview process a co-created one. I’m also aware, however, that the fact they felt entitled to do so (while others may not have) was never separate from the differing degrees of power associated with our gendered positions.

This brings me to Adam’s interview, which is when I felt that my legitimacy as a researcher was most directly challenged. His skepticism towards my project seems to have begun from the time I handed him the consent form that describes the research and my obligations to participants. He laughed out loud when he read the consent form paragraph that describes where he can find assistance in the event of experiencing emotional distress associated with his participation in the project. He told me “If I think about this again tomorrow, I’ll probably have thought about it too much. So I don’t think I’ll be having much stress.” I think the remark was intended to be lighthearted in response to the probably over-stated “risks” I was required to list on the form. But he also conveys a sense that my project is not important, that it appeared sufficiently trivial so as to be forgettable. He continued:

Adam: You know based on your description before and what it says here [on the consent form] the purpose is, there's two ways to go about a – is this like a thesis, right? – there's two ways to go about a thesis. One is to collect your information first and then sift through that and come up with some sort thesis [statement]. The other is you go into it with a thesis [statement] and take a bunch of data and draw some conclusions that either support or could refute your thesis.

Sarah: I think I'm trying to do a combination of the two of them –

A: [interrupts, laughing]

S: I mean I don't want it, part of the philosophy too is, there's a movement in social sciences away from, you know, coming in with an outside question-

A: [interrupts] This is a pencil [for signing the form].

S: Yeah I don't have a pen... I don't want to impose a certain kind of hypothesis before getting any data. I mean it's starting, I hear a lot of the same things over and over again in the interviews. I think it's becoming-

A: [slides me the form and drums his fingers on table].

S: Thank you.

While I was transcribing this section of Adam's interview, I found myself feeling more annoyed with his advice and his interruptions than I had felt during the initial interview. I heard an increasing level of insecurity coming through in much of what I said, and sensed condescension in much of what he said. I wrote in my fieldnotes after transcribing Adam's interview:

People's expectations of what an interview should look like and what fieldwork should look like are also always working on my interviews. Like when Adam offered me two options for how I should pursue my study – the 'hypothesis first method' and the 'hypothesis from data method', as though I had never before thought of something like this. That was really infuriating.

While transcribing and hearing our exchange for a second time, I realized that I was never able to finish any of the sentences in which I'd tried to clarify my research philosophy or explain how other scholars in the social sciences were theorizing approaches to research. His laughter early on at the idea that I might formulate my arguments from a combination of a preconceived hypothesis and evidence that came to

light during fieldwork seemed to set a tone for the rest of the interview that my project and I were not really to be taken seriously. It is unfortunate that Adam and I were never really able to flesh out our different ideas about research and directly open a dialogue on the topic. I am reminded of Pratt's (2004) advice that we pay particular attention to moments of misunderstanding, thinking about what they reveal with an eye to the creation of alternative research performances. In other interviews, I felt that differing expectations from participants and I as to what interviews and research should look like were much more productive, resulting in more collaboratively-structured interviews that made sense and felt comfortable to both parties involved.

### *Assumptions*

An important body of literature already exists on the topic of how a researcher's assumptions and "blind spots" at the outset of a project effectively shape what she or he will find and influence the knowledges that she or he will ultimately produce (Haraway 1988, Harding 2004, Pratt 2004, Rose 1997, Sundberg 2003). Many of the assumptions embedded in my own research questions only came to light when the questions were actually put into practice in the interview setting. One of the biggest surprises that I experienced during my interviews was the realization that questions did not always "work" in the way that I had intended. The "misunderstood" questions that I explain below proved to be highly illuminating, but not because they provided the data I was looking for. It was useful in large part because it jarred me out of a particular line of thinking and opened new possibilities. In fact, despite being awkward to work through in

practice, questions that didn't "work" the way they were supposed to often ended up being my favorites.

I asked all of my participants "did you experience 'culture shock' when you first came to San Andrés?" I thought that by using the well-worn (and curiously under-defined) gringo term 'culture shock', participants would open up about things that stood out to them as particularly different or difficult (read: Other) in San Andrés in comparison to norms from at home. And part of the problem hinged on my assumptions about the realm of possibilities for where "home" could be for participants. It never occurred to me that I would meet and interview three volunteers who were all born, raised, and living in Latin America. My assumption that volunteers would all be from Europe and North America was soon to come crashing down. When I asked Rolando if he experienced culture shock when he arrived in San Andrés, he assumed that the "culture" I was referring to was the "gringo culture" of the volunteers. He explained that, yes, he had felt culture shock, mostly from listening to disparaging comments about Latino food:

Sarah: Did you feel a "culture shock"?

Rolando: With the other volunteers, definitely.

S: How so?

R: Well... it's, I don't know. I think, I've heard comments that I'd never make. For example, when they talk about food and stuff like that, I feel that every family here is offering their very best and people should be grateful. It's not hard for me, but in some ways it's hard for them, not being used to this kind of food and all. Me? I always eat tortillas, rice, beans, plantains. I love it! For them, maybe it's more unfamiliar. But personally, if I were in their place, I'd keep those kinds of comments to myself, you know, trash-talking peoples' food and stuff like that.

[translated from Spanish]

My assumption that volunteer definitions of “culture shock” would refer only to San Andreseño norms was inverted in Rolando’s answer and became glaringly apparent. In attempting to elicit ideas about Othering with this question, his answer helped me see that I was also fixing San Andreseños as the only possible inflictors of “culture shock” in this encounter. It made me realize that, despite my “decolonizing” research aims, it was easy to unintentionally smuggle a Eurocentric standpoint into my project. It’s possible that other such essentialisms are reinforced in my project, despite my claims to the contrary. I was grateful to Rolando for “misunderstanding” my interview question and providing me with a tangible and personal example of the problematic politics behind my own research assumptions, an idea that many discussions of feminist methodologies have rightly called attention to.

### *Tables Turned*

I often began interviews by reassuring participants that there were no “right” answers to the questions that I would ask them. And yet there were many times that I disagreed with peoples’ responses to my questions. Some of the most challenging moments for me came when participants asked me how I would answer the interview questions. It wasn’t until the tables were turned like this that I realized how difficult coming up with a “right” answer could be. When I revisited these interviews during transcription, I found that my own answers were often ripe for critique as well. This showed me that I am not beyond Othering myself, and it renewed my sympathy for the difficulties of being an interview participant. I realized that it had been much easier to ask the questions and analyze others’ answers than it had been to answer the questions

myself. When the tables were turned and questions were posed to me, my answers were not unproblematic, and in turn likely influenced the ways participants understood and thought about the question themselves. Also when participants asked me for my own answers, it dramatically changed the tone and power dynamics of an interview, perhaps rendering interviews more egalitarian and the answers we provided more collaborative.

The following excerpt is from my interview with Angela. She had been explaining her ideas about change and progress in San Andrés and asked me for my input on the topic:

Angela: And what about you?... Have you seen it change? I mean has San Andrés changed since you've been here?

Sarah: Yeah, definitely it's changed. I don't know if it's changed like in, in you know, huge or like really problematic ways or something. I mean it's gotten a lot bigger. The 'up top' has really expanded, I guess like down here you can only expand so much cause of the lake. But it's a lot more people, but I mean, the whole reason that I wanted to come back here after my first trip, I mean besides having met Walter, the things that I love about the town are still pretty much the same.

A: What do you love?

S: Um, yeah I don't know. You talked about a lot of it. Like, I think it's a pretty open, welcoming town. Like most people I find, you know, they give me the benefit of the doubt. They don't assume I'm a weirdo or a snob or whatever 'cause I'm a gringa. Yeah, I think it's, it's just a really easy town for me to be in. I feel it's super-friendly like I feel like I have friends that I could count on without, I mean... I'm always surprised when I come back which people remember my name and stuff. I think relationships are a big deal in San Andrés, like it matters to people. And I don't know, the lake, I love. Um, yeah I just love walking around. I don't, I can't quite put my finger on it. And it's a much slower pace, I'm from a city at home too. And every time I come here, I'm not having the revelation anymore, but every time I come here I'm like, I have that week or whatever, and I'm like "Oh yeah! Life is for enjoying, not for stressing about".

A: Yeah. I kind of, I mean, yeah I def... For a vacation it's great, but I couldn't live like this.

S: No?

A: Uh-uh. I feel like I'd lose, not that I'd lose my mind going crazy, but I just, my brain kind of turns to mush a little. I just kind of, I don't know.

S: I, you know, I-

A: I think it's just how I am. I need to be extremely busy to keep my self on track.



S: Getting married changed that a lot for me. 'Cause when I was here traveling with my friend the first time, we did a whole lot of, like, hammock-swinging. You know, 'Oh gee, what should I make for dinner tonight?', but with, I mean, nieces and nephews, and like, there's always something going on. I don't know, I feel like I've been wanting to read this book I'm reading and haven't gotten a chance to all week. I've been busy. It hasn't been stressful busy, but it's just been like, busy, I don't know.

When Angela asked me to share my own thoughts and experiences, she momentarily took me out of the role of interviewer and brought me closer. I responded by sharing personal details about my connections to San Andrés and opening myself much more than I usually did in interviews. When listening to this interview again, I was surprised to hear myself mention the idea of a slower pace of life in San Andrés. Often when other gringos mentioned how “relaxing” and “stress-free” life was in town, I was skeptical. Many of the degrees to which I experience relaxation and lack of stress in San Andrés has to do with privilege and the fact that I (and other gringos too) am there somewhat “at leisure” and with enough money to live well. While most San Andreseños are running households, going to work, and raising kids, I am free of such obligations. Families who struggle economically to put food on the table and pay for basic healthcare would likely not share my belief that San Andrés serves as a reminder that “life is not for stressing about”. I know of many mothers in San Andrés who work almost nonstop from 4am in the morning when the first tortillas hit the grill, until sundown when the last of the hand-washed laundry has been put away. Though I fail to mention it in my conversation with Angela, much of the reason that San Andrés symbolizes a lack of stress for me has to do with the privilege of not having to work or worry about money while I'm there. The ideas that we put forward (including Angela's claim that her brain could turn to mush in San Andrés from lack of keeping busy) betray the fact that we are both gringas at rest here.

These aspects of my responses show that I'm never separate from the very same privileged viewpoint that I seek to make visible and critique.

Seeing that my own responses can be just as flawed as everyone else's makes me think twice about how to go about critiquing these kinds of everyday imperialism. I see a need to criticize the Othering that underpins some of the more imperialistic interview answers, but I also feel a responsibility to try to do so without laying blame on the individual answerer. After all, I think it's crucial to situate everyday imperialisms as widespread and deep-seated features of being gringo; in addition to being somewhat unfair, to situate such problems primarily at the personal or individual level is to grossly underestimate their power, complexity and pervasiveness.

Another example of having my questions turned back on me came from my interview with Jenna and Marion. Here is what happened when I asked them the question "What do you think about the word 'gringo'?:

Marion: What do *you* think about it?

Jenna: Yeah. Just cause you, that's like-

Sarah: Well I'm interested... I'm... I've wanted to make it kind of like a point of focus in my, in my project because when I first came to San Andrés – like I came from a really white city and went to like a school that was, you know, all my friends were white, with maybe like a handful of exceptions – and when I came here it was almost like for the first time it hit me, kind of like... ton of bricks, kind of thing, that um, white wasn't just "normal". Like, I, I, don't know how to explain it. I became aware of whiteness as like, as a race with all its own little quirks and stereotypes, and, like the fact that, you know, people here had some stereotypes about you know, white people getting sunburnt...

Marion: [laughing] Yeah.

S: um, being bad dancers, all these things that I was like, I was actually really into hearing about it, 'cause it was like a healthy dose of-

J: Yeah, reality.

S: -of realizing that, that whiteness wasn't somehow neutral to which everything else was-

J: Right...

S: -this or that.

As in the case of Angela's interview, I found that my response involved personal details of my experiences in San Andrés. The connection that I make between visits to San Andrés and coming to see whiteness as a racialized category worthy of investigation is an important one that I've often had difficulty articulating. This interview moment has proven to be particularly useful in helping me articulate some of my research concerns, and how they came about. I realized that a major benefit of having the tables turned during this interview was that it required me to articulate my thoughts on the spot and in plain language, regardless of how amorphous it might have been in my head. Though it might seem obvious that I should have already answered the question "what do I think of the word 'gringo'?", I had never actually come up with a response until I was asked by Marion and Jenna.

### *Setting*

A final collaborating factor that influenced my interviews is the setting in which discussions took place. To a much greater extent than I would have thought, interviews were always shaped by what was going on around us. Often participants would see or overhear something that they would then weave into their answer, perhaps changing what they would have otherwise said. At one point during Harriet's interview, she noticed a sickly dog walking down the street. This prompted her to mention how she had been deeply troubled by the ways that animals were treated in San Andrés. I also have many interview recordings that are peppered with abrupt starts and stops – whether because of loud thunderstorms, bathroom breaks, interruptions from other people, running out of time, technical difficulties, or some other reason. Depending on the number of

distractions around us, the interview tempo was often anything but smooth. Another factor that shaped interviews was the location where we would meet. I usually let participants choose whatever place was most convenient for them. The vast majority chose to be interviewed at a restaurant in town that is renowned for making particularly delicious milkshakes and catching a cool lake breeze. It was also quiet, which made recording there relatively hassle-free. A few participants preferred to be interviewed in the cantina over a cold beer, some asked to go to the ice cream shop, others requested the beach. There were two interviews, however, that took place in locations where I recall feeling anxious and ill at ease.

When I made arrangements with Adam to interview him, he requested that I pick him up at his host family's house, from where we could walk to "a great place" he knew about. We were about halfway through our walk when I realized that he was heading towards a particularly seedy cantina by the lake. I knew it to be a place of ill-repute that only the hard-core drunkards visited. It was a "men only" kind of place and I had never seen a single woman set foot inside. To make matters even more intimidating, the cantina was only four houses away from where my parents-in-law live and I was mortified at the idea that their neighbours might see me there. It seemed strange to me that Adam would have suggested this place since he was not much of a party person. I don't think he brought me there to put me on the spot; I honestly think he'd only ever been there early in the day, when the place was quiet and empty. He seemed to have no idea that it had a bad reputation. I didn't want to appear prudish so I never shared any of my misgivings with him. I glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then tentatively stepped inside. We were the only customers there and had our choice of tables. The bartender brought us

two Cokes and the interview began. But I found it hard to relax. People would often come in and out looking for the owner or to make a delivery, and I worried about someone I knew seeing me in such a dodgy place. Here, the reality of who I was and where I was kept getting in the way of “smooth” data collection. (Eventually though, someone I knew did walk through the door. But our meeting ended up being more humorous than embarrassing. One of Walter’s cousins works for a soft drink company and delivers orders to vendors all over town. He walked in carrying a crate of bottles to the bar and just about dropped it when he saw me sitting there. He did a double-take, said hello, then burst out laughing, which made me burst out laughing too. Of all the people who could have spotted me in the dubious cantina, I’m glad it was him.) Looking back, I’m quite sure that my discomfort with our surroundings worked its way into our rapport during the interview. I felt that Adam and I had trouble communicating and I think we each felt largely misunderstood by the other. This was the same interview that I cited above as the example of when I felt that my research was particularly trivialized.

The second time that I felt uncomfortable with an interview location was when I visited a male volunteer at his host family’s house after dark. He had been busy all day and requested that the interview take place at 8pm. When I arrived at the house, no one answered my knocking. I knocked again louder and called out asking for Dustin by name. A teenage girl answered, told me that he was in the shower, and asked if I wanted to come back tomorrow. I apologized for calling so late and told her that he had agreed to an interview at 8pm. She let me into their front yard and I sat on a bench to wait. When I made the arrangements with Dustin to meet at his house, I hadn’t considered that this might prove to be an imposition on his host family, who clearly appeared to be getting

ready for bed. What's more, in San Andrés it's unusual for women to visit male friends after dark. I worried that my presence probably looked inappropriate. Dustin's interview went really well and he had a lot to say. Before I realized it, it was almost 10pm and I could hear the dogs out barking in the streets. Another factor that I hadn't considered: I had a long walk home down some dark streets and would be passing some pretty feisty dogs along the way. I mentioned this worry to Dustin and he offered to walk with me. After his interview I made a note in my fieldnotes that it seemed much easier, less "sticky", to interview women. This was in large part because it looked more acceptable to others. I wrote: "I wonder how often interviews have looked like I was crossing a line, especially as a married woman?" Just as it did in Adam's cantina interview, the messiness of bodies being "out of place" got in the way of a seamless research performance with Dustin. Bodies (mine, Dustin's) and their location had influence; they interacted with and affected interviews in significant ways. I was beginning to see that, in the interest of my own comfort zone, I would have to set some tighter limitations on where I was willing to go in the name of research.

The final examples that I have on the implications of interview setting involve the role of interruption from other people. Other people at the restaurants, beaches, and bars where interviews took place were not always aware that participants and I weren't "just" there to hang out. During interviews, we were sometimes approached by friends and strangers wanting to chat with us. In some interviews, participants and I would later bring up, re-enact, and sometimes laugh about the interruption. In this way, passersby often worked their way into interviews and influenced what was said. These interruptions were never completely random; people felt entitled to approach us because of who we were

and where we were. Our gender, our gringo-ness, the drinks sitting in front of us... all of these factors, and many more, combined to position us as being approachable.

I interviewed Natalie in a bar at night. She was a very animated speaker and I soon noticed that the volume of her voice often grew according to her level of enthusiasm. I remember feeling slightly self-conscious during a few of her louder exclamations, when I could see other customers' heads turn to look at us. At one point, while Natalie was right in the middle of responding to a question, a man came over and introduced himself, seemingly out of the blue. He asked us where we were from, what our plans for the evening were, and then he offered to buy us drinks. When we politely declined, he backed off and went back to where his friends were sitting. Natalie went on with the response she had been formulating before he showed up as if the interruption had never happened. When I asked her the question "what's been most difficult for you in San Andrés?" she explained that, although she enjoyed it, teaching English in the schools was sometimes very frustrating. She then gave an example of how the boys in middle school would sometimes flirt and say suggestive things to her. I wondered how much of her remembering this sexualized example was tied to the fact that we had just been flirted with and offered drinks seconds before. I also noticed that Natalie got much quieter than she had been before we were interrupted. It was almost as if she had been (unfortunately) reminded, as a woman and as a gringa, not to draw attention to herself in the bar if she wanted to avoid getting hit on.

My last example details the most unexpected thing that ever happened to me during an interview. It happened early on during my interview with Angela, while we were sitting in a quiet, but crowded, restaurant at night. The excerpt starts with Angela

responding to a question about travel when we are suddenly interrupted by three obviously drunk volunteers who charged over to our table and spoke to us in voices loud enough for everyone else in the restaurant to hear:

Angela: "It doesn't seem like very many people travel here, very far from the town, you know. Or maybe they'll go to Guatemala city. So-

Eric: "Hola! [In Spanish] Good evening!"

Sarah: [In Spanish] Good evening.

Derek: We're sorry to interrupt [Angela and I laugh], but, there is a question we need to ask.

Sarah: Oh sure.

Eric: [to other guys] Huh? Me?

Joshua: [to other guys] Yeah, not me.

Eric: [to other guys] Well what question?

Joshua: [to other guys] Well I thought we were on our way already, we don't need...

Eric: [In Spanish, to me] We want to smoke.

Derek: [In Spanish] He wants to smoke some weed.

Eric: [In Spanish] And I don't know where to buy it.

[all three guys laugh]

Joshua: this is like the worst...

Eric: [to Angela] so do you speak English?

Sarah: I, I...

Eric: [to Angela, in Spanish] Do you speak Spanish?

Derek: Yeah, yeah, she's from Chicago.

Eric: [In Spanish] Do you speak Spanish?

Andrea: [In Spanish] Yes. [laughs]

Sarah: You guys are crashing an interview [I turn off the recorder].

Sarah: [minutes later, guys have left, I resume the interview questions] Okay continuation.... the next question is do you think there's any disadvantages [to gringos being here]?

Andrea: Any disadvantages? Well, what we just experienced I think is a disadvantage [referring to the three guys]. People who just kind of come in and not really come here to like soak up the culture, to just have a party, or, I just feel like trample on the culture. Just come in and, no, doesn't seem like they're really, I don't know, interested in learning about the culture. More just about having fun and they're own experience here. You know, maybe separate from what the people who actually live here are doing. I think that would be a disadvantage... [At the Spanish school] I haven't really run into anybody that I felt like, you know, kind of felt like they shouldn't be here. That are you know, not respectful or, you know, kind of here for the wrong reasons. I haven't met anyone from the school. That guy that came to this table, or those couple of guys [from Volunteer Petén] that came to this table,



yes, I completely was uncomfortable with their mentality. I mean they're just oblivious to like, where they're at. And the culture around them and what's acceptable and not acceptable. And it's like they're unwilling to give up a very small part of their life, I hope, or you know, a piece of their life while they're here. You know? It's like they're still holding onto it. Even though it's not acceptable, it doesn't kind of flow in. You know? Which I think is not a very good mentality to have when you're traveling. I mean you do, you have to let that go, some of your culture and your life and your lifestyle when you are traveling somewhere else, you know? When in Rome, live like the Romans, or, you know?

By involving us in their quest for marijuana, the guys who approached Angela and I put us in a very awkward position. The fact that they chose to ask us in Spanish, a language that all of the local patrons around us would understand, only made their interruption all the more obnoxious. Northern Guatemala sees a lot of drug-trafficking, most of it marijuana and cocaine that is en route to the U.S. and Mexico from further south. Both of these drugs can be found in San Andrés, but unlike in much of Canada (where it seems to me that marijuana is far less maligned than cocaine), both drugs are considered to be equally unacceptable by most people in town. Yet again during an interview, I was worried about what other people might think. Would Angela and I be deemed guilty by association by others in the restaurant? Even though I told them I had no idea where to find marijuana, and eventually asked them to leave, I wondered if onlookers would be suspicious that I might have some dubious habits since the guys had assumed I would know where to find drugs. As is evident in the above excerpt, Angela was also offended by their behavior and she used their performance as her primary example of why gringos can be a damaging presence in town. Much of the reason that she stressed the importance of respecting local norms to such an extent in her interview response is due to the rowdy behaviour we had been subjected to just moments before.

The three pot-seekers became unlikely co-creators of Andrea's interview responses. Interviews are thus never as removed from "the everyday" as they may seem.

In often very humorous and humbling ways, the fact that interviews involved real bodies in real places was always a particularly undeniable (if also unpredictable) aspect of fieldwork. During interviews, the "outside world" was always banging at the door, making it impossible for me to neatly carve out a separate space for the practice of research. The two are inseparable. By paying close attention to the interview setting, I came to see yet another example of how "reality" and "research" are inextricably intertwined.

### **Choosing subjects**

I turn now to a different kind of examination of bodies and places in research, one that is primarily concerned with the politics of which people and which places get chosen for study in the first place. Long before my fieldwork ever began, when I was only just beginning to outline my research interests for this thesis, I met another graduate student whose ideas would have a profound influence on my project. At the time when I first met Julia, I had envisioned that my thesis would investigate the effects of undocumented migration to the United States on families who were "left behind" in San Andrés. When I explained my topic to her, however, she seemed less than impressed. She challenged me to think about what benefits or drawbacks such research could have for the people who participated in the study. "So," she asked me, "what's in it for them?" It was a question that I had difficulty answering. After all, it's unlikely that people in San Andrés would have gained anything immediate or tangible from being studied by me.

Given the extent to which (albeit unconscious) threads of Orientalism and Eurocentrism have been identified at the heart of research on Othered subjects (Said 1979, Smith 1999), Julia was of the opinion that if researchers were going to engage in conventional social-scientific research on people more marginalized than themselves, they had better have a darn good excuse. She argued that academia had historically been a particularly insidious, if often seemingly-progressive, site for the reproduction and reinforcement of imperialist socio-cultural hierarchies. How did we, as graduate students, know that our own research wouldn't end up just being more of the same? After all (as Haraway has already reminded us), vision can be particularly obscured from positions of power and privilege; even the best intentions are not always enough. Julia inspired me to deliberately design my own project with the legacies of colonial histories and academic power asymmetries in mind. Her own solution had been to conduct her thesis on immigrant homelessness as activist collaboration with her research participants, who designed, conducted, and disseminated the study with her at every step of the way. I decided on a different tactic, which was to choose as my research subject a group of people who are not marginalized in relation to me, but who instead tend to benefit from the injustices of imperialisms and inequalities in many of the same ways that I do. I wanted to interrogate the subject position of "gringa/gringo" with a view to how the racialized privilege that underpins it might be dismantled, or at the very least made more visible.

This shift in my research framing, from focusing on San Andreseños to focusing on gringos, changed the political implications of my project. Julia's question of "what's in it for them?" did not carry the same weight now that it referred to people who are

usually poised to benefit from, rather than be further marginalized by, North-South inequalities. Doreen Massey explains a similar logic in discussing the politics of openness and closure in her book *For Space* (2005). Though set in a very different context, her line of thinking is worth importing into my discussion on the politics of choosing research subjects. In her chapter titled “There are no rules of space and place”, she gives an example where two dramatically different political projects both proclaim their entitlement to increased spatial closure; both seek to build stronger boundaries and keep “outsiders” out. The first example is anti-immigrant movements in Hamburg, Germany, the second is the Deni indigenous people in the Amazon seeking to keep a transnational logging corporation off their land. Both groups advocate closure, but the given the vastly different political implications at stake, Massey explains that there are “no rules” about openness or closure that would apply equally to both:

Perhaps Hamburg should indeed open up, while the Deni are allowed their protective borderlands. Holding such apparently contradictory positions may be perfectly legitimate. It all depends on the terms on which the argument is based. When those on the right of the political spectrum argue, say, *for* the free movement of capital and *against* the free movement of labour it does not necessarily entail a contradiction... [T]he argument about openness/closure, in other words, should not be posed in terms of abstract spatial forms but in terms of the social relations through which the spaces, and that openness and closure, are constructed; the ever-mobile power-geometries of space-time. Hamburg and the Deni are set within very different power-geometries, very different geographies of power.” (165-6)

Deciding who is “in the right” is impossible through decontextualized abstraction or by appealing to the idea that places should either always be open or always be closed. Massey’s argument that “It is perfectly coherent to argue both for a significant relaxation of European rules on immigration (greater openness) and for the right of developing countries to put up protective barriers around, say, a vital sector of production or a

nascent industry (greater closure)” (165) is not a contradiction; it is an insistence that claims cannot be abstractly judged in isolation from their political implications in practice. She privileges context and, the politics that lie therein, over one-size-fits-all rulings. Massey explains that deciding who to support “... is a genuinely *political position-taking*, not the application of a formula...” (166, my emphasis). It is a statement that I would also like to apply to methodological decisions in research. After all, although not all researchers might see things this way, choosing who to study and how *is* taking a political position.

When I overhauled my research topic after meeting Julia, its political implications changed. The positions of gringo and San Andreseño not interchangeable, “separate but equal” identities, any more than anti-immigrant activists in Hamburg and the Deni indigenous group in the Amazon are interchangeable subject positions. The difference, as Massey tells us, is power. The same holds true for many examples of binary identity positions: masculine/feminine, white/black, straight/queer, Self/Other (Said, 1979), etc. Here too, the difference is power. Such binary pairs do not show two equal sides of the same coin; instead they describe co-dependent, “stumped” (Nelson, 1999), constructions that are shot through with power inequalities. Each side of these pairs is constituted in relation to the other, and it is particularly crucial to remember that such construction is hierarchical. One side is more powerful and has more control than the other side over how both positions are discursively and materially reproduced. Masculinized and feminized are not “separate but equal” states within a patriarchal system, any more than white people and people of colour can be equally victimized by racism (they can’t).

Similarly, I feel it's fair to argue that despite the fact that gringos are mocked and differentiated against in San Andrés, they are not Othered. "Standing out" or being in the minority in a given situation, is not the same as occupying a socially-marked (and therefore inferiorized) position. Twine provides us with an illustration that could be particularly applicable to the category "gringo". Her explanation helps me to remember why investigating whiteness is very different from investigating other racialized positions. She describes her research context in Brazil, where she points out that for whites:

...the eroticization of racial categories may be experienced as pleasurable and indeed nonracist. In a context in which whiteness is valorized, white researchers may be exotified and eroticized but in contrast to blacks, they are not typically reduced to merely hypersexed objects. Since whiteness is associated with intelligence, prestigious pedigrees, and middle-class positions of authority, this particular form of eroticization may create a symbolically affirming context – unlike the disempowering and negative climate for black men. (2000: 20)

The power that is bound up with whiteness, its assumed normality, and its centuries-long history of self-aggrandizement have all served as the very conditions of possibility for racism to take place; whiteness cannot also then be racism's target. I am deeply skeptical when I hear stories that feature men as victims of "sexism" or white people as victims of "racism". While it is not impossible that such identities (man, white, etc.) could be discriminated against in isolated incidents, the fact that these identities continue to occupy dominant positions vis-à-vis their binary counterparts (woman, brown etc.) renders the possibility of systemic and widespread inferiorization, implied by terms like "sexism" and "racism", nonsensical. The rules are not universally applicable to everyone (Massey 2005), at least in part because power and goods have never been

equally distributed to everyone. Again, returning to Massey, the difference is power, and power makes a lot of difference.

I feel that all this entitles me to talk about gringos – even in ways not always complimentary, and even if I produce knowledges that would not be appreciated by some of my participants – and yet still claim a broadly progressive research agenda. If I were studying San Andreseños with the same attitude, I think it would be a different story. But dishing out gringo criticisms is often easier said than done, and for a number of reasons. Gringo volunteers in San Andrés are used to considering themselves and their presence in town as benevolent. After all, as I will elaborate later on in this thesis, they have come “to aid development in Guatemala... [and to] participate in, design, and implement sustainable projects.” (VP website). I know that many of the gringos who participated in my project would be uncomfortable or even offended at the idea of tracing this helping imperative and its associated teleological “development” paradigm to legacies of imperialist oppression and assumptions of western superiority. And I don’t like to make people uncomfortable or offend them. I say as much in my fieldnotes:

I am so uncomfortable with critiquing my “friends” and myself for the sometimes dubious and colonialist reasons we came to San Andrés, because it could hurt feelings and bruise egos. It’s a bit of a downer really, throwing negativity out there onto a free-wheeling world of travel and helping. It hurts me to write some of this, but honestly I think it matters. I’d rather give voice to the part of myself that despises the racist assumptions that I and others make in San Andrés, than feign believing only in the benefits of gringos in San Andrés. I am being critical of, and dissecting, a group who’s positioning rarely makes them the objects of study. My need to study this particular phenomenon comes from a personal desire to question my own deeply colonialist ties and attitudes towards San Andrés, but a questioning that I don’t feel can meaningfully take place without borrowing from the complexity and different ways this colonialism manifests from the experiences of other gringos like me, and not like me. I am studying for the purpose of critique, it’s not easy, but if it remains unquestioned, so do the hierarchical relationships that I see being normalized every day between gringos and locals in San Andrés.

There was often particular resistance in my interviews to the question “Are there any behaviours or attitudes that you’ve noticed among other gringos in town that bother you?” Most people deflected by saying that they did not like to focus on negative things, and many others chose to turn the question around and instead emphasize aspects that they found admirable and positive about gringo behaviour and attitudes. Jennifer expresses a widespread view here: “I just feel like, especially with the group of volunteers that I’ve met so far, there’s only positive things being brought in here.” Even those, like Pete, who mentioned some problems and concerns ended with a reassuring reminder that when it comes to gringos in San Andrés, “the good still far outweighs the bad”. I know that gringos are loath to criticize each other, which is why I’ve come to see myself as occupying a very awkward position. Not everyone is going to like what I have to say. Even if the above section on interview politics showed little else, it definitely revealed that I am a person who cares a great deal about what other people think. And I understand that it can be painful to see aspects of one’s identity being linked to privilege, racism, or imperialism. The fact is that I insist on talking about something that I think a lot of gringos would prefer not to talk about. I find some reassurance here from France Widdance Twine (2000) in her reflections on race and research. She argues that white people who want to call attention to and dismantle white privilege are speaking that which is supposed to remain silent, are “race traitors”, where “seeing racism meant being racist” (21). It was very difficult for many participants to see whiteness as racialized category at all. When I asked the question of “How have you seen race and gender play out so far for you in San Andrés?”, three respondents told me that the question didn’t



really apply to them at all because they were white and male. By implying that “gender” only applies to women, and that “race” only applies to people of colour, such responses reinforce the idea of white men as being the normalized standard in contrast to which everything else is Other. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the effects of whiteness can be particularly hard for white people to see. Those of us who occupy whitened racial positions are not used to have our own processes of racialization pointed out as such. There were times during my fieldwork when I felt caught between not wanting to disturb the group camaraderie and harmony by bringing up “negative” ideas about gringos in San Andrés on one hand, but on the other hand, I wanted to get people thinking and talking about how whiteness and privilege were at work during our stay.

In wanting to challenge some of the aspects of white privilege that were under-recognized by gringos in San Andrés, by necessity this meant adopting a somewhat oppositional stance to the rest of the group. Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of the pain that can be associated with being torn between two ways of seeing:

When two or more opposing accounts, perspectives, or belief systems appear side by side or intertwined, a kind of double or multiple “seeing” results, forcing you into continuous dialectical encounters with these different stories, situations, and people. Trying to understand these convergences compels you to critique your own perspective and assumptions. It leads to re-interpreting the story you imagined yourself living, bringing it to a dramatic end and initiating one of turmoil, being swallowed by your fears, and passing through a threshold. Seeing through your culture separates you from the herd, exiles you from the tribe, wounds you psychologically and spiritually... (2002: 547)

These words nicely encapsulate some of the challenges that came with critiquing a position that I myself occupy. She reminds me why despite the fact that things can get uncomfortable, however, it’s important for researchers to be true to themselves as part of a broader emancipatory project: “Removed from that culture’s center, you glimpse the

sea in which you've been immersed but to which you were oblivious, no longer seeing the world the way you were enculturated to see it... you see through the fiction of the monoculture, the myth of the superiority of the white races." (Anzaldúa, 2002: 547, 549)

One of the ways that I hope to avoid personally offending research participants is by being specific in terms of accountability. Even as they reap the benefits of gringo privilege in San Andrés, I do not wish to suggest that my participants and I are in any way the malevolent architects of such inequalities. Our accountability lies in whether we refuse or reinforce well-established everyday imperialisms in San Andrés, which are not always easy to see in the first place. I also want to be clear that the critiques I develop in this thesis do not only apply to the particular individuals that have participated in my project, since gringo politics are widespread and stretch well beyond San Andrés.

During fieldwork, I was not alone in my interest in questioning the political implications of being a gringa in San Andrés. A handful of the other gringos I interviewed also saw plenty to critique in terms of their positionality in town. To re-state Anzaldúa's (2002) point above, they continually sought to re-interpret the story they imagined themselves living. Their theoretical insights have been invaluable to me in thinking through many of the problems that troubled me most. I try to therefore be extremely cautious not to paint all gringos with the same brush, even as I also feel it's important to show how we all occupied similarly privileged positions vis-à-vis locals, and how, despite our significant individual differences, we always ended up being a fairly sticky clique in practice.

By deliberately choosing a relatively privileged group of people as my research subjects, I feel I was able to side-step some of the thorny issues that are present when

studying more marginalized groups. But my choice also led to some different and unexpected challenges, especially in terms not wanting to offend anyone with my critical standpoint, and in terms of striking a balance between portraying gringos as a group from which generalizations can be drawn and portraying them each as individuals with complex and nuanced identities. These are uncomfortable and unresolved tensions which continue to inform this research, but it is my hope that they might also do so in productive and creative – and not only in confusing or contradictory – ways.

There is a final aspect of the politics of choosing research subjects that merits some mention here. Thus far, this sub-section has focused on the politics of the *people* we study, but my discussion on the politics of research subjects would be incomplete without also mentioning the implications which *places* we deem suitable for study. As an undergraduate student, I majored in Latin American Studies, an interdisciplinary field in which the only common thread that linked some of the classes was the geographical region under discussion. Although much of my undergraduate course content was critical of the ways that Latin America has been represented in the North, I don't remember personally questioning the internal coherence of this region – “Latin America” – as a category itself. Sundberg (2005, 2009) points out some of the problems inherent to this categorization and the ways it has been historically targeted for study and for exploitation in the United States. She explains that the very labeling of the region “Latin America” “presumes a natural congruence between geographical categories and an underlying social reality, which can be accurately mapped. Obscured are ontological questions concerned with how categories are constituted through intersecting discourses and interlocking power-geometries” (2009: 412). She goes on to trace the troubling

connections between the rise of Latin American Studies and an imperialist U.S. state agenda in the region. Here, Latin America was both defined, and imagined as inferior, in relation to implicit ideas about the superiority of the United States.

Thus knowledge produced in North America about Latin America is never separate from these troubling legacies and the problematic interpretive categories they gave rise to, especially for a graduate of Latin American Studies like myself. In shifting the object of my study from Latin Americans in Latin America to productions of gringo in Latin America, I seek to re-position Latin America from being a site for investigating the Other, to a site that is particularly ripe for observing everyday imperialist encounters in practice. I try to move away from more conventional Latin Americanist geographical imaginaries by self-consciously calling attention to some of the ways that gringos continue to position Latin American people and places with an idealized Northern benchmark in mind, taking seriously Sundberg's challenge to Latin Americanist geographers to think about how they might "generate narratives that subvert, rather than reproduce, hierarchy and inequality." (2003: 181). I seek to open the production of whitened and western subject positions to the same scrutiny which has traditionally been directed at Latin American Others.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Over the course of my research, methodological concerns have proven to be central in shaping my understanding of what it means to be a gringo in San Andrés. I have found it impossible to separate questions of who I research, and how I go about it, from interpretations of what I see. The countless decisions that I made as a researcher –

from the seemingly banal choice of how to word an interview question, to the long and involved process of selecting appropriate theoretical frameworks to analyze my findings – all deeply affected what I eventually I came to experience and explain about the thorny politics of gringo-ness. The assumptions that underlie many of my research strategies can often be impossible for me to see, let alone articulate, in all my partiality. My intention in this chapter has not been to offer a methodologically transparent rendering of the techniques by which I “did” my research, but rather to investigate some of the moments when I felt that the messiness of “doing” research were particularly acute. These instructive moments – when the links between practice and knowledge were at their most undeniable – were not limited to my time doing fieldwork in San Andrés, but span the entire breadth of the research process. They emerged in my earliest articulations of potential research topics and continue even now as I deliberate over which words to use in this sentence.

In particular, I chose to emphasize some of the interview moments by through which I came to understand that research is always informed by much more than meets the eye. Much of what I came to light during interviews was fleeting and escaped the confines of my voice recorder and written transcripts. There were wonderful moments of research-in-the-making, that are crucial to hold onto for their methodological import, even as they “exceed the written trace” (Pratt 2004). My participants and I were implicated in the data produced to an extent much greater than I had imagined possible, and we were far from being the only co-authors in this process. I found it to be a humbling realization that research knowledges are produced by multiple “actors”, seen and unseen, knowable and unknowable, material and discursive. The “outside world” in

all its messiness was never separate from the supposedly innocent space of the interview. Interviews were coloured by this misleadingly separate “outside” and by where participants and I were located in it. Not only our locations in terms of the physical (or emotional “state of mind”) settings in which interviews took place, but also in terms of our locations in relation to each other, and within wider power geometries.

The experience has strengthened my support for feminist methodological approaches and their insistence that we are never separate from what we see, do, or say. Transformative potential can thus be derived from the feminist assertion that “the personal is political”. Read with my own research methodologies in mind, this well-known slogan reminds me that my positioning (in spite of my limited vision of it) always informs the stance I take, that what is presumed to be innocent and innocuous is often anything but, and that what “hits close to home” can be particularly ripe for critical evaluation. It also encourages a shared investment in, and renewed accountability for, the knowledges we produce and the representations we promote. Finally, such an approach supports Haraway’s argument that our perspectives are always necessarily partial (in the sense of being both “biased” and “incomplete”), and leaves open the possibility for other voices and experiences to enrich or complicate our understandings. In some ways the practice of research is not entirely unlike the performance of gringo privilege: both can be easy to engage in uncritically, both rely on normative and seemingly self-explanatory practices, and both can wield considerable epistemological and ontological power.

### **3. Difference-Making and “Making a Difference”**

What does it mean to embody and practice a gringo identity in San Andrés? This chapter builds empirically on my larger argument about the problems and political implications of gringo identities. Below I investigate “gringo” while paying attention to the similarities and differences of how it is practiced among the many different foreigners that visit San Andrés. This attention to the practice of “gringo” is necessary in order to conceive of how it could be done differently, in more empowering and emancipatory ways for gringos and locals alike. I trace six salient features of gringo positions in San Andrés: their emergence in relation to local identities, their tendency to share similar socio-economic identities, their whiteness, their “stickiness”, their gaze, and their power to define difference. Each of these qualities is rife with politics and carries important material and discursive consequences for both gringos and locals. As I’ve mentioned above, many of the gringos that I interviewed were engaged in working on volunteer development projects. That their motivation was to come “to help” is of no small consequence to how they practice gringo-ness. The ways that whiteness and helping co-articulate to constitute “gringo” was evident in much of my fieldwork and analysis, inextricably linking characteristics that were difficult to separate from one another.

San Andrés has a long history of being a contact zone, a history that continues to the present day. I borrow the term “contact zone” from Mary Louise Pratt, which she describes as a social field, “where peoples geographically and historically separated come

into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict” (Pratt, 1992: 8). One of the key features of a contact zone is the idea that different actors come into being in relation to each other. There are no pre-given or fixed identities here, and no outcomes are decided in advance. As Pratt elaborates:

A ‘contact’ perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among... travelers and ‘travelees’, not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (8)

I find that her explanation bears particular relevance for the spectrum of gringo-local identities in San Andrés, both in terms of her emphasis on relationally-constituted subjects and her attention to power inequalities. Encounters in San Andrés between foreign gringo visitors and local San Andreseño community members are always heavily laden with the politics of their differing locations in complex webs of histories and geographies of colonialism, resource access, land tenure, identity politics, economic globalization, and much more. Many of the most salient inequalities in this encounter are woven into the very term “gringo”, though the baggage that it carries is not always obvious in everyday usage of the word. “Gringo” is a slippery yet illuminating marker of identity, and explanations of what it means – U.S. American, foreign, unwelcome, western, imperialist, tourist, white, desired, despised, rich, and the list goes on – can be deceptive in their solidity. Its definition is highly contingent and depends a great deal on the context in which it is used. “Gringo” can mean very different things in different situations to different people; there is no unitary meaning that precedes the particularities of its deployment. I am fascinated by “gringo” as a highly-charged by product of old and



new Latin American contact zones, and find myself increasingly impressed by its complexity every time I attempt to pin it down.

In her writing on subject positions in the colonial contact zones of Australia, Kay Anderson (2007) warns against the oversimplification of assigning pre-determined and inherently antagonistic colonizer/colonized identities. Following Stoler (1995), she instead favours an increased attention to the relational nature of colonial identity constructions and supports conceptualizations that trace the making of these identities in practice. Paying attention to how racialized and hierarchical identities come into being and are maintained in practice can provide important insights as to how they might also be destabilized and practiced differently. Though “gringo” and “San Andreseño” identities differ contextually in many ways from the “colonizer” and “colonized” positions that interest Anderson, both sets of identity pairs share an invocation of racialized differences in which the powers to produce knowledge about each other, and the material consequences of this disparity, are unevenly distributed.

Writing about Guatemala, Diane Nelson (1999) argues that almost all identity positions are produced through some degree of neocolonial processes, including – and she implies perhaps *especially* – her own relationally-constituted and power-laden identity of gringa anthropologist. She explains having the painful but instructive realization that her gringa status continually links her to the United States and the long history of military dictatorships that it has supported in Guatemala. The privileges enjoyed by U.S. citizens abroad were something she felt her Guatemalan friends were always acutely aware of: “I am not necessarily easily distinguishable from the [U.S.] state that both protects me... and is feared and hated by my friends” (1999: 64).

As a strategy for incorporating the many complexities, political implications, and historical contingencies of identity positions like gringa, she theorizes a framework of “fluidarity”;

a practice and theory of identity-in-formation, aware of its own investments, the pleasures of invention and the erotics of relational subject-making. It is historically specific and knows that it is very hard to give up solid bodies... but that this may be the most responsible way to approach the current conjecture in Guatemala. (1999: 37)

Nelson and Anderson both support conceptions of subject formation as relational and both resist framing it in terms of fixed or pre-existing identities (what Nelson referred to above as “solid bodies”). In elaborating on her own gringa positioning, Nelson also underscores the relational nature of this identity. Being a gringa, she explains,

necessitates a relationship with Latin America – a North American is not a gringa until she crosses a border... Gringo is a category produced through interactions, and as such, it works on a variety of borders including but not limited to national frontiers, stereotypes of phenotypic difference, sartorial codes, and – as ‘gringa’ (marked by the Spanish feminine) – gender boundaries. In turn, the gringa changes the places she goes (1999: 41).

The fact that Nelson’s research takes place in Guatemala and that she specifically engages with the politics of gringa positioning made her work particularly useful in thinking through gringo politics in San Andrés. I found it helpful to think about the many other different kinds of borders and boundaries that not only produce gringos in the first place, but produce them differently and complicate this position by inflecting it with degrees of heterogeneity. Some of the colonial baggage and the multiple border-crossings that underpin gringo positioning are made visible in San Andrés in gringo-local encounters, where differences are continually (re)produced on the ground.

## Unpacking “Gringo”

I asked everyone that I interviewed what they thought about the word “gringo”. While some participants seemed to think that I was testing to see if they knew an “actual” definition, others seemed to think that I was asking how the term registered on an emotional level for them. Both kinds of responses were helpful, and their diversity led me to believe that “gringo” is an especially complex position that elides stable or straightforward explanation. Harriet puzzled over possible definitions when I asked her what she thought about “gringo” in her interview. She said that she didn’t find it offensive, and proceeded to question whether it meant “white” or whether it could encompass anyone – regardless of their racialization – who was not Guatemalan: “I mean, Brody is Chinese-American and they call him gringo, but I mean his skin is so white. But Dario is from Colombia and they called him a gringo too.” Harriet had her Spanish-English dictionary on hand during the interview and decided she would look it up to clarify. Her dictionary defined gringo as “a foreign, English-speaking person”. She frowned after reading the definition out loud and said that it somehow didn’t seem to quite “fit”. But her disappointment with the dictionary definition of “gringo” makes sense given that the word is extraordinarily fluid in its meaning and implications. It is historically and geographically contingent and its meaning can change from time to time and from place to place. Harriet had understood “gringo” to have a racially- or nationality-based meaning; the fact that a dictionary definition was not able to thus adequately capture her experience of the word is testament to its situational specificity.

Dustin identifies a clear whitened racial connotation when kids call out “gringo” to him in the street, but presumes that its meaning is apolitical: “They’re very young and

learn that white people are gringos... I don't think it's anything political or anything like that." Marion shares Dustin's identification of a racialized connotation, but feels that "gringo" contains a degree of denigration. She compares it to a notoriously racist name for people of African descent: "So I don't know, I've... it's not like a word that bothers me too much, it's like, like not quite as offensive as like, as like, the 'N-word', for example." For me, the fact that "gringo" signifies a whitened position renders it incapable of occupying a comparable degree of insult as the word that Marion alludes to; to me her point that "gringo" is "not quite as offensive" is a massive understatement. The two words are not at all interchangeable or analogous in terms of their political implications or their histories. Because whiteness and African-ness refer to drastically different degrees of racialized power, at least since the days of the European slave trade, words that take aim at these positions will have vastly differing political consequences. To me, one word names racialized oppression, while the other enacts it.

After Marion spoke, I tried to explain my point of view. Jenna, who was being interviewed along with Marion, responded to what I said and described some of the negative feelings that being called a gringa have provoked for her:

Sarah: ...Racism happens as like a social hierarchy, right? And here it's complex because you're an 'outsider', you're *like* an Other, whatever, but you're not, because you're not exactly on the bottom of the pecking order, which happens to a lot of people of colour at home, I think. So-  
Jenna: Yeah, that's really interesting. Yeah I think it's, yeah it's definitely like an Othering. I think after a while, just being called 'gringo', like, doesn't, like it doesn't really bother me, but like you know, after a while it's just like "Yes, I'm an outsider!", like, kind of like *picks* at you a little bit, you know?

She relates the experience of being called a gringa to being a target of Othering, an interpretation that I am uneasy with, as I tried to suggest above. "Gringo" differentiates,

to be sure, but it does not inferiorize the same way that Othering does. There can be an alterity implied by the term, but it is an alterity that would be quite dangerous to confuse with Othering in the ways that Said (1979) intended. For while labeling someone a gringo is both a distancing and difference-ing move, I think it is hard to argue that it justifies dominance by a gazing Self in the way that marking someone as Other does. Said speaks of Othering as a process which can ultimately be used to justify oppression and inequality. This is not the case with “gringo”, where the word is also a naming of privilege, no matter how scorned such privilege might be. Herein lies a destabilizing potential of ‘gringo’: those who use the word to describe my research participants and I – whether benignly, insultingly, or somewhere in between – are usually speaking from some degree of relative marginality. In San Andrés, gringo labels are allocated, after all, under a San Andreseño gaze. The locals who deploy gringo in town are clearly not the usual suspects of Said’s white, hetero-masculine, western, capital-‘S’ Self.

Pete finds a slight negative connotation to the word gringo, but points out that this connotation is much less sharp than what he anticipated given the historical origins of the word that he had heard about:

Pete: Um... gringo... I think before coming here I thought of it as more of a, like a negative term, because I think the translation is ‘thief’.

Sarah: Hmmm.

P: Or I think I read that somewhere, that it’s ‘thief’ or that it’s a... I think I read some other explanation that it’s... refers to like the green jacket of some army that was here trying to take over. And so it’s ‘green, go’.

S: Yeah, I think I’ve heard that too.

P: Yeah.

S: I’m not sure, I’m not sure what the history is though, myself.

P: But based on those, those two potential explanations, it doesn’t sound like a positive thing. It sounds like you’re gonna get the hell out, um, but I think that, my sense is that the meaning of the

word has probably evolved and changed as things have changed here. I think it's more like just an identifier for white people...

S: It wasn't meant as an insult when you got called a gringo, you don't think, or?

P: Kind of like on the [Volunteer Petén volunteer handbook] document it says like you know, they'll try and, they'll call you it, but it's not really meant to... as a, as a serious insult. It's more like kind of poking fun maybe...

S: Okay.

P: Maybe with a little bit of an edge.

Pete assumes that as gringos have become a more welcome presence in San Andrés, the meaning of the word “gringo” has become more benign. Many other gringos agreed that the word was imbued with a renewed benevolence because of positive gringo contributions to the community, and many distanced themselves from overt colonialist connections associated with the term. Ivan articulates his interpretation of a changing definition of “gringo”:

Maybe at first it was more negative. ‘The gringo that would come and steal our lands’, ‘the gringo that would come and steal our women, our riches’ and all that. Whereas now we come, we’re gringos but we help them, so, I think it just got into the everyday vocabulary, but I don’t think it has the same meaning as before...

Timothy agrees:

Timothy: when somebody says ‘gringo’, which very rarely happens, it’s kind of amusing rather than, rather than anything serious, or...

Sarah: What do you think, what do you think about the word gringo?

Timothy: Not a great deal, I think it’s just a word that is almost kind of being re-claimed as a good word. Like, yeah, we’re gringos, we’re here volunteering.

But such gringo claims to goodness and local approval obscure the ways that by their “semi-vacationing” presence in town, and their participation in development projects that position San Andrés as in need of “west knows best” gringo help, gringos continue to occupy a privileged and neocolonial position vis-à-vis locals. In proposing an

increasingly positive spin on the word “gringo”, Ivan, Timothy, and others diminish the potential for a crucial San Andreseño mode of discursive resistance to the imperialist paternalism of gringo “helping” (i.e. “gringo” in the pejorative sense of the word), and instead recast the local reaction to being one of gratitude (i.e. “gringo” in their re-claimed positive sense of the word).

It seems that many gringos are quick to articulate their presence in terms of being something that is beneficial, if not absolutely necessary, to the well-being of people in San Andrés. Many Volunteer Petén participants explained that they see their presence as a “helpful” one, or as Teresa put it “we come here and people see that we just get things done”. But when my participants and I imagine, as gringos, that our work and our presence are met only with appreciation from locals, it is a depoliticizing maneuver. It ignores the colonial legacies and imagined superiority that continue to inform white western forays into Othered spaces for the purposes of “development”, what Heron (2007) calls “colonial continuities”: “racialized constructs from an era of empire that are central to producing a bourgeois identity” (7). Gringo self-congratulation in San Andrés is also an act that shifts attention and emphasis away from the inequalities that facilitate gringo visits in the first place.

Not all gringos felt that “gringo” was gradually becoming absolved of all of its negativity, however, and some felt that gringos needed to do more to encourage a re-defined positive spin on the word. Adam felt that the reputation of gringos in town was something that he had the power to single-handedly manipulate through his own personal behaviour. He specifically seeks to give a favourable impression of, as he says, “white North American Christian males”:

whether I like it or not, I represent... white North American Christian males. You know, how I behave says something to the people whether I want it to say it or not. So I try and put on a good face, you know, be positive. Make a good advertisement for other people that fit into all those groups... I don't know what the [gringo] stereotypes are but I want them to get the impression that Americans are friendly, that they are not – don't assume to be the boss in any given situation. That they're willing to listen... Willing to work... Yeah, sort of, you know, to build a new stereotype. I don't know where necessarily they're coming from, but at least what I'm advertising is 'I'm this way' and possibly leave the message that other people like me are the same way. Build a, reinforce the stereotype that I want them to have. As opposed to what they see in the movies, or wherever else.

In assuming that his behaviour alone is powerful enough to shape San Andreseño perceptions, however, Adam positions himself as able to transcend the political baggage that “gringo” always already signifies. What's more, Adam's desire to challenge the stereotype of U.S. Americans as bossy is somewhat contradicted by the way that volunteering is often practiced by gringos in San Andrés, himself included. Locals are not always consulted before development projects are decided upon, an act that speaks volumes about gringo assumptions as to who should be “the boss” in town, and a practice that therefore undermines Adam's agenda to recast gringos as “willing to listen”.

I would like to clarify here that this doesn't mean that I am in any way opposed to gringos reflecting critically on their behaviour in town, as Adam does; I fully support the idea that gringos be intentionally respectful of San Andrés and the people who live there. What troubles me is that gringo attempts at “good behaviour” often stem from personal investments in wanting gringo stereotypes to be more complimentary for the sake of reputation, rather than stemming from a responsibility to behave respectfully, period; without furthering an agenda or expecting something in return. This can have important material implications for people in San Andrés. Gringos too often feel that they can get away with behaviour in town that they wouldn't dare try at home. Evan recalls how



before he left on this trip, one of his friends told him that he would basically be able to do absolutely anything he wants in Guatemala, and would have license to indulge in any manner of behaviour that would be deemed unacceptable at home. Evan was careful to explain that he disagreed, and that his friend apparently believed in what Evan called the “arrogant imperialist fantasy that he could be a cultured American coming to a wasteland of poverty and illiteracy. So, who cares if you break down a tree?” Though the attitude of Evan’s friend may seem extreme, such “imperialist fantasies” do indeed play out in San Andrés and many locals have plenty of outrageous “gringo stories” to prove it. Here is an excerpt from my fieldnotes that outlines an – admittedly somewhat tame (in comparison to other stories) – example of gringo disregard for local norms:

Harriet told me about doing a bare-ass sun-tanning session with Brody that I think is super-inappropriate. She wouldn’t do this at home at a public beach. I think she was just trying to do something risqué or against the status quo as part of an assertion of her new adventurer, hard-core travel identity. Most women in San Andrés cover up a lot to swim and only a handful will strip down even to a bathing suit. She also mentioned something earlier about wearing her underwear when it was really hot, sitting on the stoop outside of her host family’s house. And she basically pulled out an ass cheek in front of the library (to show me her tan lines) and which was awkward, thinking about who might be see that walking by. She said she had her top off and that Brody was completely naked when they were tanning at the gringo beach and I just think that’s completely mis-reading what’s acceptable or not acceptable here.

Such behaviour will also inevitably inform local perceptions of gringo (in addition to the imperialist baggage that I’ve already suggested), and no amount of deliberate, tip-toeing, “good behaviour” is likely to undo it.

The insulting potential of “gringo” also became a source of anxiety for many others, who, like Adam, policed their own behaviours in the hope that it might erase the negative undertones of the word. Like the perspectives of Ivan and Timothy that I

mention above, these more anxious gringos looked forward to “gringo” having an increasingly positive connotation. But unlike Ivan and Timothy, they felt that gringos currently have a largely negative reputation in town. Dustin, for example, worries that his penchant for partying reflects poorly on the position of being a gringo: “I don’t know, I mean I wish I didn’t party here. It’s more about how it fits into the whole picture. The whole idea they have of what a gringo is.” Harriet goes into more detail in describing how partying exacerbates her already frowned-upon gringa identity:

I feel like you’re not just sending a message about yourself, I feel like you’re actually sending a message about your culture at home too, you know what I mean? I feel like a lot of people here have the perception that like Americans are just like spoiled rich, rich people who don’t care that much about others... I just don’t want them to think that... I don’t want them to think that we just come here and just party the night away and spend huge amounts of money on things we don’t need. I just don’t want them to think that about me... I do care what they think... For me personally, that kind of thing embarrasses me. I don’t know, I guess I just feel like our presence here is kind of important.

Both Dustin and Harriet felt that partying (and the wasted money that it could imply) was a key source of disapproval from locals. They, like Adam, framed their behaviour largely in terms on how it reflects on their reputation as gringos rather than in terms of how it affects local members of the community.

Still other gringos were more accepting of negative connotations of their identity in town; rather than struggle to redefine “gringo”, they instead sought to explore the continuing imperialist connotations of the term. Nancy felt that “gringo” still contained the derogatory implication of being unwelcome, and she seemed open to the idea of exploring how imperialist underpinnings of the word could still be relevant today. Here, she has just told me she thinks that “gringo” basically means “outsider”:

But you know what? I *am* the outsider here and there's been a long history of outsiders coming and generally, historically speaking, with not good intentions. And so if there's a word for outsiders coming, that's just fine for me. It's true. I don't know what all the connotations are for people here in Guatemala saying it, but I think for whatever connotations there are, there's probably been a basis. And maybe I individually don't meet all of the definition, but... I don't know.

Catherine too felt that the unconfirmed but often-mentioned historical origin of the word – that it derives from Mexicans yelling “Green, go!” at invading U.S. soldiers wearing green uniforms – was important to bear in mind. She explained that she accepted any negative colonialist implications of the term and that she would rather have San Andreseños call her “gringa” than have them feel pressured to deny the many differences that exist between them.

These two reactions are markedly different from the attempts to resist the negative implications of “gringo” that I examined earlier. Catherine and Nancy do not shy away from the fact that regardless of their individual intentions and their personal attitudes towards San Andrés, their presence in town is but a small part of a long lineage of gringo-local encounters, the legacies of which cannot be easily overcome (even by the most well-intentioned and well-behaved of gringos). They open the possibility for a more politicized engagement with the complexities and discomforts of what it means to be a gringa here.

That “gringo” continues to be a potentially-offensive term in San Andrés is also evident in the *Eco-escuela*'s campaign to eradicate usage of the word among the local teachers and host families that it employed. In my interview with the *Eco-escuela*'s current director, he explained that since the school's inception in the early 1990's as a community development initiative of the U.S.-led NGO Conservation International, any

Andreseños affiliated with the school were asked to refer to foreign students as either “foreigners” [*extranjeros*] or, preferably, as “students” [*estudiantes*], but never as “gringos”. The director joked that this is likely not the way gringos are talked about when they’re not around, however, and said that personally, he thinks it’s good character-building for students to be called gringo once in a while anyway.

A similar intentional terminology shift was also talked about by gringos who were in town to volunteer with Volunteer Petén. Jennifer told me that ever since I had asked her about “gringo” in her interview, she had been more vigilant about how she heard it used. She told me that her host family brother recently asked her what she thought when neighbourhood kids yell “gringa!” at her. She told him that it wasn’t a big deal, that maybe they were just trying to show off for each other and have some fun. He then told her that he doesn’t like the word and that his family never uses it. He said he was taught never to call someone a gringo and to use *extranjero* instead. Jennifer felt that this was a particularly sensitive and polite approach for him to take since he felt there was an overall negative connotation to term. She said she had never heard “gringo” mentioned by any member of her host family; they instead referred to gringos as “volunteers” [*voluntarios*]. It would seem that among San Andreseños who depend on gringos for their livelihoods, there may be some wariness of using the term, given that its potential to offend could jeopardize relationships with gringos. Here it’s important to point out, however, that I have found local self-censorship when it comes to using “gringo” in town is relatively rare; the vast majority of locals seem to have no qualms whatsoever with using the word.

Many of the participants I've cited above seemed to pick up on a tension between "gringo's" more innocuous uses as a descriptor (outsider, white, U.S. American, English-speaker, tourist, foreigner) and its potentially pejorative performative power (imperialist, bully, unwelcome, guilty, stuck-up, thief, enemy, spoiled). Nelson delves into the powerful undertones of this latter understanding of "gringo":

*Gringo* is defined as 'disparaging' in the dictionary and carries a burden of hatred. A possibly apocryphal origin story attributes Mexican coinage during the US invasion, as a way to tell the green-uniformed yanquis to go away ("green-go!")... It seems to mean "ugly American" and imperialist, condensing many highly charged emotions around global inequalities, wealth, colour, cultural capital, commodity access, military aid, rude tourists, and complex imaginaries of Rambo and Madonna... Very close Guatemalan friends might use it as a term of endearment, but so powerful is the word that it was something of a rite of passage when someone used it directly. It seems to be used extensively in referring to foreigners who are not present. (Nelson, 1999: 63)

Much of what Nelson explains here is directly corroborated by the interviews I've cited above. It is no accident that the supposed historical origins of the word "gringo" that she mentions (and that Pete, Catherine, and others also mentioned in interviews) are situated in the early era of U.S. empire. Gringos supposedly emerged centuries ago as figures of a colonial contact zone, positioned in relation to people who sought to contest the white, Anglo imperialism that they represented. I think that one of the reasons this identity position survives with the prevalence and force that it does today serves as testament to both the ongoing imperialist inequalities between North and South in the Americas, and the continued resistance they inspire.

This is one of the main reasons that I find the term so interesting and why I deliberately use it – rather than the politically-muted alternatives of "foreigners" or "volunteers" – in my research analysis. I also think that adopting the politicized self-identification of "gringo" can promote a decolonizing agenda. The word's derogatory

implication both acknowledges and interrogates the whitened material and discursive privileges that gringos enjoy in many parts of Latin America, often to the detriment of locals. For me, this identification implies an accountability for the inequalities that have positioned me as a gringa, just as it also implies a responsibility to work towards diminishing them.

Another graduate student pointed out to me that self-identificatory usage of the term “gringo” by gringos like me could lead to the problematic re-appropriation of a word that has never rightfully belonged to us to begin with. I take his warning very seriously because, as I mention above, I spoke to (and silently disagreed with) many gringos in San Andrés who felt that, given their friendly intentions towards San Andreseños, it was high time “gringo” be cleansed of its negative connotations. This gringo desire for re-definition is a very different situation in comparison to examples of marginalized groups who have reappropriated words that were used previously against them, such as the case of LGBT-identified people and the term “queer”. Because gringos are not usually marginalized vis-à-vis Latin Americans, and because of the inequalities that tend to position them advantageously, gringo-led neutralizations the word “gringo” could mean diminishing the power of a crucial emancipatory tool that brings such inequalities into view. Because privileged groups often possess significant discursive power, there is indeed a danger that an exclusively depoliticized gringo usage of the word “gringo” could soften what Pete above called its “edge”. Much of this “edge” involves the term’s continued insistence on naming a neocolonialist relationship to Latin America, whether intentional or not.

Gringo self-identification is thus to be used cautiously by gringos and never in isolation from the politics, histories, geographies, and inequalities from which it springs. At the same time, however, it bears remembering that “gringo” has endured in large part because of its flexibility and its ambiguity. The word has always signified differently to different people across time and space. That some gringos in San Andrés now seek to depoliticize it may not necessarily be anything new. Perhaps I underestimate the ingenuity and mutability of “gringo” by implying that it could be so easily manipulated or co-opted. Given its longevity thus far, it seems likely that, for most people, “gringo” will continue to invoke the power asymmetries of the colonial contexts from which it originated, regardless of gringo attempts to re-shape the word’s significance. As Nelson explains, regardless of how she as a gringa thinks of herself, she is also being read by others who might see her quite differently:

...my body image as a helpful North American academic must include the image other bodies have of me, which includes bundles of stereotypes, images, and histories. As such, I am always already participating in identificatory processes informed by my own imaginings and fantasies, and at the same time, I figure in the fantasies of others. (1999: 54)

As gringos, my research participants and I are always already caught up in webs of signification that stretch far beyond our own self-perceptions or realms of understanding “gringo”. Multiple, diverse, and changing understandings of “gringo” in the San Andrés contact zone – our own, those of many different kinds of locals, those of many different kinds of other gringos – intermingle to produce a hotly-contested and unstable identity that is always under negotiation. The resistance that can be implied in some San Andreseño usage of “gringo” significantly troubles the idea that foreign, wealthy,

whiteness entails only self-definition, totalizing power, unified dominance, or stable privileges.

### *Relationality*

A central tenet of gringo positioning that I have implied thus far, but not yet fleshed out in detail, is its relational difference to the position of “local” or “San Andreseño”. While neither of these identity categories are permanently fixed and there is a considerable amount of diversity and difference within “gringo” and “San Andreseño” groups of people, one is rarely, if ever, both at the same time. These identities emerge as by-products of contact zone encounters in San Andrés, where they take shape in relation to each other. And while a boundary between the two positions is often implicit, it is not always clear-cut; there are degrees of local-ness and foreign-ness amongst different people in San Andrés.

My husband Walter grew up in San Andrés and lived there until moving to Canada in his mid-twenties. On his first visit back to San Andrés, many people commented on his paler, whitened complexion. He explained it as being a result of hibernating indoors during the long Canadian winter, but his brother often teased him that maybe it was because he was in the process of “gringo-izing” [*tal vez te estas agringiendo*]. “Gringo-ization” is usually something that San Andreseños are usually accused of upon returning from stints of working in the U.S. under the table, and the term carries an implication of arrogance for having come home with extra U.S. dollars saved up. Walter explains that not everyone who has been to the U.S. is accused of “gringo-ization”, only those who come home with money and think they’re better than everyone



else. On our most recent visit for my fieldwork, his cousin joked that he had barely recognized us when we walked by because Walter was dressed “so gringo” [*“te ves tan gringo”*] in cargo shorts and Birkenstock sandals.

For Walter and other San Andreseños living in the North then, the supposedly clear-cut positions of “gringo” and “local” can move much closer together (even though “being a gringo” is not quite the same as being a local who has undergone “gringo-ization”). This highlights how gringo positionings are flexible and can stretch to tenuously encompass even some “locals”. But the example also shows that not just any San Andreseño can be accused of “gringo-ization”; such positioning is – yet again – always intimately related to race, wealth, travel, clothing, arrogance, privilege, and much more.

During fieldwork, I heard the term “gringo” applied to many different kinds of people, two of whom saw themselves as at least tentatively “local” insofar as they felt a shared Latino identity with San Andreseños vis-à-vis the other gringos. Dario was from Colombia and Rolando was from Costa Rica, yet they were almost always identified as “gringo” in town, very much to their dismay and disbelief. They both felt themselves to be anything but gringo, a term they associated with calling out Anglo and U.S. imperialism in Latin America, and one that they themselves had used at home in reference to U.S. tourists and politicians. They were loath to having what they perceived as the pejorative connotations of “gringo” used on them. Dario explains:

Dario: Well, uh, a funny thing is that sometimes they call me “gringo”.

Sarah: Gringo?

D: Just because I’m white. I thought that too when I saw Rolando the first time, I thought he was American.

S: Oh wow.

D: So the first thing you have to say is like “I’m not American, I’m Colombian”. They have a hard time understanding that. First because they have no idea where Colombia is, second... second, they don’t know that Colombia’s first language is Spanish. So I basically just tell them “I am from a country very similar to Guatemala, it’s a bit bigger than this”. And I’m a volunteer. And I say it, I’m a “volunteer”... Here, I’m, I’m very white. You have to [laughs] acknowledge that. Here I’m really white, and they... lots of times, they have called me gringo. Which personally I am not really fond of being called gringo.

Dario feels it is his complexion that caused people to identify him as gringo, but it appeared to me that this may have been an insufficient explanation given that there are also many San Andreseños even more fair-skinned than he was. It seems that the fact that he was continually called “gringo” for the duration of his three months in town – long after he’d explained his Latin American-ness to locals and revealed his obvious fluency in Spanish – derives from multiple facets of his differentiated positioning in relation to locals, not the least of which was his continuing insistence on being called a “volunteer” (a label that, as I mention above, has often euphemistically been substituted for “gringo”) and his self-defined “upper class” Colombian origin.

This shows us that gringo is not always connected in fixed or predictable ways to whiteness, nationality, and language. Rather, gringo identities like Dario’s emerge out of ever-changing relationships, comparisons, and positions between people and places. It helps me explain, to elaborate on another example, how Rolando, a self-identified leftist-leaning, middle-class Central American who proudly identifies as Latino can occupy a gringo position in San Andrés. It is his relationality to local norms – his unfamiliar Spanish accent, his unusual skater fashion sensibility, his group of rowdy gringo friends, his leisure time, and perhaps most significantly, his ability to pay for transportation, homestays, and volunteering fees – that position him, at least in some eyes, in some

places, and at some times, as embodying the whitened alterity and privilege that are very much associated with gringo-ness.

Ivan too was initially surprised that he was called “gringo”, considering that he made a point of telling people that his father is Guatemalan. He explained some of what he has learned about being gringo/*extranjero* since coming to town when I asked him if San Andreseños ever consider him a Guatemalan:

I think they still consider me as being gringo, a little bit. Even though I’m half Guatemalan, they definitely consider me as being *extranjero*. My family coming here [to San Andrés] and being 100% from Guatemala, [they] would be considered as an *extranjero* family too. Because it’s not only about the race, it’s about way of life, it’s about the income, it’s about the social background. It’s about all that, you know. That makes you be an *extranjero*.

Ivan recognizes here how gringo identities can be especially tied to class and economic power. He explains that the fact that his father’s family is elite and lives in Guatemala City could position them as “foreign” in a semi-rural, middle- and working-class town like San Andrés. He thinks his father’s family would embody some of the same privileges (“way of life”, “social background”) that gringos occupy in town in comparison to San Andreseños, to the point that despite being “Guatemalan”, they too would be considered foreigners here.

In the examples above, “gringo” is clearly unmoored from the dictionary definition of “foreign English-speaker” that Harriet shared with me in her interview. These examples also show “gringo” being used very differently than its historical connection would suggest, which links it to United States citizens in general, and criticism for the country’s military ambitions in particular. In the three examples that I’ve mentioned above, all of these “reluctant gringos” speak Spanish as a first language, none have U.S. citizenship, and two of them (Rolando and Dario) specifically self-identified as

“Latin American”. But they all embody privileges that prevent them from escaping the label “gringo” completely: the ease of their travels, their visit to the town as a ‘volunteer destination’, and the wealth they embody all mark them as outsiders in contrast to locals in San Andrés.

This kind of relational differentiation is summed up nicely by Arun Saldanha who points out that “[b]y bringing together bodies from different places for different lengths of time, “contact zones” are especially prone to highlight a body’s location.” (2007: 183) Rolando and Dario are located within a similar realm of privilege as the other gringos visiting from North America and Europe. Their claims to Latino-ness do not necessarily preclude a gringo location within networks of money, mobility, whiteness, and power (in part, these factors could have collectively informed what Dario was picking up on when he says he felt especially “white” in San Andrés). But by continually denying their gringo labels and reasserting their Latin American-ness, to some extent Dario and Rolando do trouble an easy or self-evident separation between “gringo” and “local”.

### *Diversity?*

The above examples highlight some of the heterogeneity that exists among people who fall under the rubric of “gringo”, yet it is also important to critically examine the similarities shared by those who end up in San Andrés. After all, it is not “just anyone” who shows up to volunteer or study in town. While the label “gringo” stretches to encompass a diverse array of different people, they do tend to enjoy a level of access to economic resources in particular that is vastly different from people living in San Andrés.

The director of Volunteer Petén, who himself comes from the U.S., has seen hundreds of gringo volunteers come and go over the years. He notices a clear pattern in terms of what kinds of people usually visit San Andrés:

Everyone's kind of concentrated like in the area of like age 18 to 25, university-bound, you know, parents have money to let them go traveling. I mean we don't get too many kids that are working their way through life. We don't get any lower class income. We don't get any African-American people. We don't get any, you know, minority groups. Because they're all white and well off, so they're all kind of in this, in this... in this bubble...

The whitened privilege, both classed and racialized, that many gringos likely share both at home and abroad (what the director above calls "this bubble") is evident in the following quotation from Teresa, who explains that her father earns a comfortable income and sponsors her travels: "I have the resources, you know my dad makes decent money, he's an engineer so he paid for my plane ticket and it's like, well, if I have the means, then there's no reason not to, in my mind. There's no reason not to go out of the country and help others." She then continues on, seconds later, to disregard the economic privilege that she has just outlined, however, and argues that, in fact, "every single person in the world" could come to San Andrés to volunteer if they really wanted to:

One of the greatest things I've learned about being in high school and college is that if you need money you can get. You can get it. There's absolutely no reason that you shouldn't be able to, say, travel out of the country or something. Cause I've known so many people that solely went to friends, family, coworkers, whatever, and said "Hey, I'm going to volunteer, can you donate \$10?" and most people are so enthralled and think it's such a wonderful thing that they'll give you some money, you know? So I think it's silly that... there's no reason that every single person in the world shouldn't be able to do it.

Teresa is not able to see that her ability to "get money" at home is intimately tied to her socio-economic positioning, and to the positioning of those who are able to contribute funds for her travel. As the Volunteer Petén director explained above, it's very unusual to

see volunteers who are not white and well-off financially; this is very likely related to the fact that many volunteers are able to draw on the kinds of resource networks that other people in their home countries would not have the same access to.

The privilege required to come to San Andrés in the first place were often overlooked or denied by my research participants. Wealth in particular was downplayed; even as the airplane tickets, shiny new iPods, digital cameras, comprehensive travel insurance, weekend excursions to Belizean beaches or Mayan archaeological sites, fancy dinners out in Flores, and generous gifts to host families often suggested that most gringos were quite well-off financially. Many, though, made explicit claims to the contrary. Harriet told me that she went into great detail explaining to her host family that she “wasn’t really rich”, and that it was only because she had just received a tax refund that she had so much extra money for parties and weekend trips to other parts of Guatemala.

Rolando also tries to distance himself from the affluence that underpins his ability to be in San Andrés:

I don’t know, unfortunately, people think that if you’re traveling, it’s because you have a lot of money, so you can spend it in other countries and you don’t have to worry about a thing. Maybe because these people have never had the opportunity to leave, or they’ve never even left their department [the Guatemalan equivalent of a U.S. state or a Canadian province] because they don’t have the economic resources, so... But they don’t know that sometimes travelers don’t have much money either... I eat in the market or at street vendor stalls. That’s what, that’s the cheapest way.  
[translated from Spanish]

Frustration that locals perceive gringos to be wealthy was quite common, and usually stated in terms much stronger than what Rolando articulated above. Here Dario bemoans the fact that San Andreseños assume that all gringo volunteers are wealthy:

That's a problem with the [volunteering] scheme we're having here. They just think we're rich. You are white and just suddenly you become really rich. [Sarcastically] And, wow! You start, like, money starts to rain on you!

And that's one of the things that really bothers me, like, because we come here, we pay them for staying here, and then we build a school for free. [They] start to have the idea that 'Oh, these people are just really rich and they don't care about money.' So if you really ask some of the nasty stories, sometimes people ask the volunteers for money.

Frugality and cash-saving tips were common topics of discussion in gringo circles, as were heated and sometimes demeaning debates on whether or not to give extra money to homestay families who requested it. While it seems that most gringos didn't consider themselves to be wealthy, the fact that everyone was able to partake in many activities that were financially well out of reach for locals – every Tuesday the gringos would go to the neighbouring town of San José for pizza and drinking, at least once a month dozens would leave en masse for multi-day side trips to Belize, southern Guatemala, or the Honduran islands – highlights at the very least that they occupied positions of significant monetary advantage over most local people. That they also occupied a privileged position compared to many people in their home countries is perhaps harder to substantiate from my fieldnotes and interview transcriptions (other than Dario and Ivan, who both told me outright that their families were upper class), but I absolutely agree with the comments of the Volunteer Petén director who often noticed a recurring, if also sometimes invisible, “bubble” of racialized (middle- to upper-) class privilege among gringos in town.

Gringos also largely share the ability to gain legally-sanctioned admittance to almost any country they choose, while San Andreseño travel mobility is comparatively limited by strict visa requirements, racialized prejudice that often unfairly connects Latinos to illegality or criminality (especially – but not only – in the U.S.), and higher

relative costs of travel. The vast majority of the gringos who were in San Andrés during my fieldwork (not all of whom I was able to interview) came from the United States, many others from Canada and Western Europe (France, Germany, England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, and Austria), and only a small handful from other places (two from South Korea, one from Australia, one from Colombia, and one from Costa Rica). Almost all of them identified as white. So while some of the gringos commented on the “diversity” of the group of gringos in San Andrés, many others felt the gringo sub-culture in town was overwhelmingly U.S.-Americanized and whitened.

Harriet is a white U.S. American who told me that she found San Andrés to be a welcoming and open-minded town to visit, mostly “because there are so many volunteers from around the world.” Here too is Betsey, a white woman who also hails from the U.S. and notices a lot of differences among the volunteers in town:

But as far as the volunteers go, I think it’s great... everyone’s got a different accent and they’re all from different places, like that’s great of all the volunteers. I’m really glad that we’re not all from the U.S., or all from Canada or something, you know, that there’s people from Denmark and, um, Scotland or Ireland.

Many volunteers from countries other than the United States, however, commented that they felt like they didn’t fit in with the dominant (U.S. American) gringo way of being in town, especially in group situations. Here are Hyo and Shin, who came together to volunteer from South Korea:

Shin: I cannot speak English yet. Spanish, I cannot Spanish yet also. *Poco a poco* [Little by little]. And I haven’t experienced American culture... So how I be in the group?... Or how I look in the group? I don’t know.

Hyo: Well most of the volunteers are gringos, like North American white people. Most of them, so... I don’t know, I can’t really see it from their perspective. Our perspective is pretty much the same... When he [Shin] explained, you know... like at the beginning he didn’t know how to interact with white people because he didn’t know the culture and like those social customs. I



think we're learning from everybody, from each other. Various aspects of culture. I just wish there were more diverse group of volunteers. I just wish. 'Cause it's just, pretty much everybody's from the United States. I just wish that we had more volunteers from, you know, more well off countries in South America. Like, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico. Or more from Europe. More from Asia, but... I guess the volunteering thing is not that big in Latin America or Asia.

Hyo and Shin were not alone in noticing that the other gringos in town tended to be predominantly U.S. American and white. Timothy, from England, felt that he too stood out, despite having a lot in common on the surface with most gringos. He said that it was sometimes a bit awkward to be the only British person in the group:

Timothy: I guess we just come from slightly different points of reference, like... background-wise and...

Sarah: Right...

T: Just a few things. But nothing major. [I'm] just surprised that, that I felt it. You know, we all speak the same language.

S: Right...

T: We look the same.

Timothy, Hyo, and Shin all highlight that groups of gringos in San Andrés, in and of themselves, are cultural phenomena with their own set of embedded norms. As the above-mentioned comments of the Volunteer Petén director show, they are not necessarily as culturally-diverse or as internationally-representative as some members of the group might think. That the same kinds of people tend to show up in San Andrés again and again is more than mere coincidence. It is no accident that there are many characteristics that most gringos in town tend to share, perhaps suggesting that the position of "gringo" and the desire to "help" should not be theorized in isolation from these qualities. Gringo is a highly heterogeneous and mutable category, but at the same time, its recurring correlation to whiteness and wealth (and to a slightly lesser extent, U.S. citizenship) is far from incidental and speaks volumes about entrenched patterns of

inequalities that are imbricated in difference-making processes among gringos and locals in San Andrés.

### *Whiteness*

It is no coincidence that most of the gringos who come to San Andrés either self-identify as white, or embody a whitened positioning through privileges such as having money and time to spare for travel, passports that enable legally-sanctioned entry to other countries, and feelings of entitlement and even obligation to “make a difference” in the Global South. Speaking from a very different research context, Arun Saldanha noticed a similar trend among foreign travelers who visited India to participate in psychedelic-trance dance sub-culture, especially with regards to whiteness:

Most locals and seasonal labourers don't have the money for partying... Studying the whiteness of psychedelics is not by definition limited to studying psychedelic whites. Of course, not all hippies, back-packers, or psy-trancers in the world are white. They overwhelmingly *tend to be* – because they can do it with greater ease. (2007: 57)

Similarly here, my interest is not in studying “white volunteers” in San Andrés *per se*, but rather to make more visible the “whitened aspect” of gringo positions and the impulse to “help” in order to unpack some of the political implications that stem from this. One does not have to be white to occupy a privileged and whitened position, but the fact that most gringos do identify as white and the fact that gringo positioning (regardless of actual phenotype) is inextricably connected to white-supremacist colonial histories, does speak to the importance of connecting racialization to such advantageous positioning.

Most gringos shied away from direct discussions of “race”. As I mentioned in the previous chapter with reference to gringo constructions of Self and Other, I asked

everyone I interviewed how they thought that race and gender – their own and others’ – had played out in San Andrés. More often than not, and especially with white-identified participants, the “race” part of the question bombed and was left unaddressed. Some felt that “race” was an outdated or problematic term, and many preferred to talk about “cultural differences” instead (a point to which I will return later in this chapter), and still others felt an experience of “race” in San Andrés didn’t really apply to them since they were white. People of colour were far more likely than white-identified gringos to delve into this question without hesitation. I learned from Natalie and Kim, for example, that they felt particularly comfortable in town after separately being told by different local women that because of their darker complexions, they could pass for being Latinas. They felt that their gringa positioning as wealthy U.S. citizens was somewhat mitigated by their skin tone, which created, according to Natalie, a degree of fellowship with locals. She explained that she felt her complexion made her less likely than whiter gringas to be charged an inflated “gringa price” at the market, for example. As I mentioned in the previous section, South Korean volunteers Hyo and Shin had a lot to say about racialization (their own and other volunteers’) and they both sensed and articulated a kind of hegemonic U.S. whiteness among the gringos in town.

That the importance of race, including (or even, *especially*) whiteness, was particularly invisible to white-identified gringos should perhaps not come as much of a surprise according to academic literature in the field of critical whiteness studies. Geographers such as Bonnett (1997, 2005), Kobayashi & Peake (2000) and Guthman (2008), have pointed out that whiteness has often been a particularly elusive construction of racial identity that derives a normalized status vis-à-vis marked racial categories

through its implication in systems of power. Recently, many scholars have identified the pervasive extent to which the previously unacknowledged presence of whiteness has materialized in the social and geographic landscape and informed social discourse. In the words of Bonnett (2005: 5), “It’s no easy thing to escape whiteness, whatever one’s skin color.” Saldanha (2007) and Heron (2007) have both conducted geographies of whiteness in “overseas” contexts: Saldanha on white tourists in India, Heron on white Canadian development workers in Africa. Both argue that contemporary whiteness cannot be separated from colonial legacies, which, according to Saldanha, are always at work in the production of white privilege:

The history of European colonialism cannot be separated from contemporary relationships between white and brown bodies. As commentators such as Richard Dyer point out, whites as a population have a historical habit of being forgetful about their technological, economic, and symbolic privilege. That does not mean that every white body equally reproduces this attitude. Nevertheless, my contention is that for every white body, this historical background forms a *problem*. Phenotype itself propels bodies to ethics, to making decisions about how to behave as rich whites. (2007: 169)

Some white-identified gringos, however, felt it was important to recognize that they benefited from white privilege during their stay. These gringos were, it is important to stress, the exception to a largely “white-blind” norm amongst most of my participants. Interestingly, in the very limited number of examples that I do have of white-identified gringos discussing whiteness, almost all of the responses talked about the intersection of racialization with other identity positions, such as gender. Pete and Evan, for example, both talked about the white privilege they embody intersecting with privileges associated with masculinity. Here is Pete:

P: I think I live in a bit of a bubble personally because I’m tall, white and male. Like I think there are things that happen, you know, to women and to people of different races that I don’t see

because I'm, because the, the current paradigm is that, you know, being white, male and tall are things that are just by default, you know just things that I can't control that are by default, are kind of given automatic respect... without even knowing who I am.

Sarah: Right...

P: ...So the whole point of that is that I feel like because of that I get away with more than other people might, I mean, with less flack than other people might.

Evan is from the U.S. and articulates a similar understanding:

[C]onsidering I'm a white guy, white male, you know, from a wealthy country... I'm like on top of the heap. You know, I mean let's face it. I've had all the advantages that most people here will never have, whether male or female. Yeah, I can walk into any place and no one's gonna look at me as if I'm, you know, just broken some taboo. But I can imagine, you know like with some of these places all you see is men. I can imagine for a woman... You know other females have experienced some of that, I don't know how overt it's been... Race and gender are inescapable. To say that it doesn't have an effect on the human condition is naïve, though you can't blame everything on that. [But] it always has an impact.

In addition to highlighting some of the complexities of racialized identity and how it interacts with gender, both Evan and Pete show some sensitivity to the fact that not everyone embodies the same kind of privilege that they do and that their positions of power can make it hard for them to see exactly how things are different for people who don't share their degrees of privilege. And while I think this understanding is a crucial step towards a more politicized understanding of gringo positionality, also think that gringo engagements with white privilege need to go beyond mere recognition of it and began to question how it might be – if not dismantled entirely – at least practiced differently, in less oppressive ways.

Thinking through the “undoing” of white privilege, however, is not, by any means an easy or straightforward endeavour (Anzaldúa 2002, Roediger 2002, Heron 2007). As Heron explains:

Thinking of subjects as being discursively constituted anew on a constant basis makes evident the challenges of resisting one's positioning in dominance. Refusing whiteness, for example, becomes more complicated than deciding to refrain from exercising privilege because such a choice does not, in and of itself, dislodge internalized dominance. Nor can such a subjectivity be easily, or once and for all, refused. It can, however, be deconstructed and continually challenged. (11)

I was very grateful to the insights provided by Carly, one of the participants in my project who exemplified a strong desire to challenge whiteness and think about how it could be practiced differently by gringos in San Andrés. She insisted that regardless of her good intentions, she played a part in reproducing the inequalities that gringo whiteness underwrites. She pushed me (and herself) to think about how things could work differently. Her commitment to personal and systemic decolonization was inspiring:

I was talking to some girls who were like twelve- or thirteen-years old yesterday, and they were telling me that when they grow up they want to be just like me. [They said] "Oh we want to look like you, we want to be white because you're beautiful, 'cause you're white, and we want to have hair like yours and we want to have eyes like yours". And I was probing them a bit more, asked them, like, "Well, why do you think that? What's so great about the way I look?" ...

So we started talking about it more and since racism is a huge problem, we went into that more. And how since I come in as a foreigner with more money... I can come here, I can pretty much do whatever I want, I can leave when I want, I have mobility. They don't have that. So, because I have all these extra advantages or privileges that they don't, anything they identify with me, they're also going to identify with money and power and privilege...

A lot of Latin America and a lot of the world, is brainwashed into believing that the United States and its culture and its people are better than everyone else. Um, and that's not true, of course. But they still think that and they still have that message running constantly through their mind. So by me coming here, if I don't confront those issues, like, they're here whether I like it or not, they're everywhere. And if I don't confront them and, like, talk about it and recognize racism in the sense of, like, people thinking that I'm better or that they're not as valuable or as important because of, um, whatever difference. If I don't address that then I'm in some ways reinforcing it. Whether or not I like it...

One of the aspects that I find to be particularly striking about her comments is the way she links these questions of relationality and whiteness to a personal politics of responsibility. Doing nothing, she claims, means reinforcing racism. In stressing her responsibility to “address” white privilege, Carly does not shy away from accountability.

It can be a delicate matter to interrogate the politics of whiteness. On the one hand, questioning whiteness can be thought of in terms of bringing an identity position into view that is rarely considered in terms of racialization. It often assumes a veneer of neutrality, against which all other racialized positions are marked. But on the other hand, research that focuses on whiteness does effectively render this already-powerful position the “centre of attention” yet again, even if it is for the purpose of critique. Julie Guthman (2008) explains that despite this important latter caveat, whiteness still requires close critical attention and an insistence on politics:

Many scholars have noted that a marker of whiteness is its own invisibility, that it allows whites to deny white privilege by not seeing whiteness as a racialized category. Cognizant of the critique that the prominence given to whiteness scholarship has effectively re-centered whiteness... I join those who persist in using whiteness to de-center white as ‘normal’, unmarked, and therefore universal, and to make whites accountable for their effects on others.

My intention is not to centre white bodies as the primary movers and shakers that matter in San Andrés, but rather to argue that it matters a great deal the ways power and privilege are tied – historically and geographically – to whitened practices like volunteering abroad to “help others”, or otherwise traveling through Central America for leisure. In San Andrés, the fact that the privileged nature of such practices remains invisible to many gringos only makes these traditions “whiter” still.

I feel it is useful to bear in mind that just as gringo is a relationally-deployed term, I find that the interrogation of whiteness as a critical epistemology becomes less

problematic when neither fixedly bound to nor entirely divorced from phenotype. The fact that I see gringo privileges as “whitened” does not mean that people of colour somehow lose their authenticity or become “race traitors” when they have money, passports and desires to volunteer in San Andrés. But I would argue, as others already have (Heron 2007, Koopman 2009) that they are engaging in a practice that has a distinctly whitened and imperialist history. These troublesome origins are crucial to bear in mind because they provide clues as to how older racialized hierarchies and colonial positionings that were established under paradigms of more overt biological racism (when whitened practice aligned and overlapped more exactly with white skin colour) continue to inform everyday neocolonial encounters in places like San Andrés (where whitened practice has become somewhat – but by no means entirely – unmoored from phenotype). Understanding how whiteness underpinned past systems of inequality is vital to both interrogating how it continues to do so today and to envisioning how it might be otherwise. As Saldanha explains:

[W]hites have been squarely in the business of producing and rearranging racial difference, whether it was through relatively benign exoticism and adventurous anthropology or state-sponsored genocide and apartheid laws... But these explorers, generals, merchants, and missionaries were the vanguard of a subsequent globalizing whiteness. The fact of whiteness to a very large extent determined the shape of today’s globalization, and most globalization’s injustices cannot be examined separately from it. (2007: 197)

### *Sticky Bodies*

The recurring pattern of whiteness, wealth, and U.S. American-ness among the group of gringos in San Andrés means that feelings of belonging to or exclusion from this group is often predicated on one’s racial and class positioning. Arun Saldanha theorized



the tourist cliques that he observed in India as embodying what he calls “white viscosity” in terms of the cliques’ tendency to stick together, their groupings’ resistance to “perforation” from Others, and the overwhelmingly fair-skinned bodies that comprised these groups (2007: 47). He observed a “sticky” aspect to whiteness, whereby whitened tourists tend to stick together in particular places and times, such as when they are confronted with racialized Otherness.

In the previous section, Hyo, Shin, and Timothy all noticed that the dominant “culture” among gringos in town felt strange or uncomfortable to them. It is by listening to the insights of gringos who felt that they stood out among the group that the sticky whiteness of gringo group dynamics becomes most apparent. And Hyo, Shin, and Timothy were not alone. Dario too noticed what he calls a predominant “American-ness” among the volunteers. Here I have just asked him if he experienced “culture shock” upon arriving in San Andrés:

Um, so cultural shock with the people here, not really. But, I think more relevant for me, was working with Americans in this kind of environment. Because it’s different. It’s way different. I remember being a bit stressed with the Americans that were here before, because they were like complaining, being very, very slow. And something I kind of don’t like is when Americans just cluster in these groups. So they come, they come in these groups of ten, some of them, not speaking a word of Spanish, and when they leave they are virtually the same person. You know? Because they have been in this cluster.

Saldanha’s observation of stickiness applies to what Dario explained as a U.S. American tendency to “cluster” in exclusionary ways that preclude communication with local people. It is significant that all of the participants who identified both a cliquishness and a particular U.S.-informed “culture” among the gringos were all from outside of North America. Those who experienced and articulated it most acutely – Hyo, Shin,

Dario, and Rolando (who echoes a comment very similar to Dario's "American culture shock" comment and is mentioned in the previous chapter) – were also the only volunteers who came from outside North America or Western Europe. None of them spoke English as a first language.

Ivan too said he felt much more excluded by gringos in town than he did by locals. He explained that he thinks his French nationality and the fact that he has a Guatemalan father made him stand out among a largely U.S. American group. He noticed that the group already had routines established – like swimming in the afternoon after volunteer work, and visiting the ice cream shop in the evening – in which he did not always feel welcome to participate. Ivan considers himself an outgoing and friendly person, and he says he doesn't recall ever having to make such an effort to make friends as he did among the gringos in San Andrés. He explains, however, that he felt quite the opposite reaction from San Andreseños: "I have more difficulties with volunteers than with people from here. Because people from here, on the contrary, just make you feel like as part of the city, as part of the family, as part of the house. As soon as you get here. They're very welcoming, they're very warm."

Gringos from the U.S., on the other hand, experienced this same gringo group dynamic very differently; one told me that hanging out with other volunteers felt like "sweet relief", and another called the group "a refuge". I was shaken by what I perceived to be the blatant insult to San Andreseños implied by these comments, which in my mind Othered locals as monolithically unpleasant people that gringos need "relief" and "refuge" from. They explained that hanging out with other gringos felt like relaxing into a familiar and safe space, without questioning what kinds assumptions about (or even

racism towards) San Andreseños might also be at work in producing such feelings of belonging. Among most gringos in San Andrés, the perception often seemed to be that gringos sticking together is a natural phenomenon that does not require explanation.

Marion and Jenna imply that this stickiness can encompass many different personality types, and can even tie together people that normally wouldn't want to become friends:

M: Of all the people here, like, like, we probably wouldn't be friends with them if we went to school with them.

J: Yeah.

M: ...But I think that's the same for everybody, like nobody here would be friends with each other like without this, like [arm gestures towards town].

Here, "nobody" is meant to refer to no gringo and "everybody" to all gringos; local people do not come into consideration. San Andrés and the apparently self-evident Otherness that is implied in Marion's arm gesture serves as sufficient explanation and rationale for gringos wanting to hang out with other gringos (even with people whom they might not want to associate with at home, where white viscosity loses its urgency). Jennifer too implies that gringo togetherness becomes more of a necessity in spaces of Otherness:

And it's weird. Me and Kim were talking about this, how, how under normal circumstances, like at home, in two or three days or four days, I don't become close friends with anyone. Like, you're just kind of like 'Oh yeah, that's that person that I kind of know'. But here, you're kind of forced to become really good friends with people in a very short amount of time... You're like, you're co-dependent on each other in that way.

The idea that gringos need each other – that they are "forced", Jennifer says, to make friends whether they would want to hang out together at home or not – implies that at least some degree of racialized-cultural preference, or even racism, plays a part in

choosing one's friends in town. The idea of gringo-local friendships become almost unthinkable. Though locals are never mentioned directly in the above quotations, their undesirability or unsuitability as potential friends is implied in much of what is said. Why it is that gringos supposedly need each other so badly is never directly addressed.

Marion explains that she's very happy she decided to come to San Andrés along with Jenna, her good friend from home. Here she is telling me how they dealt with the surprises of their first few days here by talking to each other about the differences they saw:

We'd be like, "This is really interesting", like, or it'd be like "Oh, I'm like kinda scared, all these noises I've never heard before" and so I think it was really great to like be able to talk to someone right there about it. I think if I were here alone, it probably would've like, been a lot more shocking. Or if we were like living in different houses... Yeah, just I guess having the volunteers to be like, to help you out, was really helpful, just to have the support.

Harriet too connected the presence of others "like her" to feelings of comfort and security. She said she experienced a lot of culture shock in Guatemala City, but none in San Andrés because of the visible presence of "so many other gringos".

In much the same vein, Diane Nelson talks about how gringo positionality can solidify a collective identity that emerges in relation to Others. Here she is speaking specifically about her identity as a gringa solidarity worker in Guatemala:

This identification [as a gringa working in solidarity with indigenous groups] in turn includes solidarity among gringos, a collective identity of sameness that partly absorbs the shock of relating with so much difference. Much of my relation with Guatemala has been mediated and accompanied by gringa *compañeras*... (1999: 50).

Nelson articulates a version of the idea that gringo cliques can provide comfort in contact zones of relentless difference-making. But her theorization too stops short of fleshing out what potentially-neocolonialist or racist assumptions underlie gringo perceptions of a

whitened “sameness” that absorbs, mediates, and accompanies, in contrast to an Othered “difference” that shocks. Questioning critically who is shocked and why is crucial to accessing some of the less innocent implications of white viscosity in the face of racialized Otherness.

As I’ve mentioned above already, however, not all gringos in San Andrés experience gringo groupings as uniformly comfortable or familiar. Those gringos that “don’t fit in” have been particularly instructive in pointing out how the groups are dominated by specific and locatable assumptions and norms that are often invisible to those who feel at home within them. We’ve seen in some of the above examples that race, nationality, and language all play important roles in determining who fits in and who stands out. Gringo togetherness is not as all-encompassing or as far-reaching as it sometimes pretends to be; instead many experience gringo groupings as painfully awkward, reflecting culturally-specific and exclusive ways of being that just don’t reflect their own personal comfort zones.

Pete, a Canadian volunteer who felt “older” than most of the other gringos in town, brings up the idea that not only do gringo cliques require a degree of conformity from those who don’t quite “fit”, they also preclude the building of relationships with local people:

...I found them just very young and kind of clique-ish, which I wasn’t really big on. So I found like I don’t really get on well with groups that you kind of have to be a certain way to get to be part of. So I kind of, just over time, removed myself from that... Um, yeah, I’m more into, I prefer to be independent and to not have to, I’m like, I’m here to, I’m more interested in interacting with the local people and kind of, which I felt that I did....

For many gringos, it would seem that one of the most noticeable negative side effects of gringo stickiness – even among those who relish in it – is the fact that it

compromises the possibility of interacting with local people. Gringos often complained that they were not able to make as many “local friends” as they would have liked to.

Many, like Carly, related this to the problem of hanging out in a group all the time:

Um, a lot of my time has been spent specifically with the Volunteer Petén group so I can't comment that much on the culture of San Andrés. I don't feel like I know the community very well, only my homestay family. And even with them, I'm still just getting at a point where I feel like I know them... I was a little, I mean a little bit disappointed that I didn't integrate more smoothly here... I was kind of thinking that I was gonna make a lot more friends that are specifically here from San Andrés. But part of that is because I go to the project site, with all the other gringos and foreigners.

Megan felt that spending so much time with other gringos took away from what she calls “the cultural experience” and getting close to her host family:

I love that everyone, you know, loves hanging out together and that, you know, it's great.... I came here to learn Spanish and I feel, like, because of all the volunteers and because we spend most time with them... I think maybe it's slightly taken away from the cultural experience of being here with the host family. 'Cause you're... going out to spend the day, and you know like the pizza night... on Thursday we might not see much of the family. 'Cause then you know we spend most of the day with the volunteers...

Towards the end of her stay, Harriet began to grow increasingly concerned that she had spent the bulk of her three-month visit mostly with other gringos:

Like I want to have connections. I wish I had more friends that were locals here. I don't want to spend 100% of my time with other volunteers speaking English... I just don't want to be some snotty-nosed American who's too good to do anything with anybody here. That's kind of how I feel sometimes. I can spend time with people from Seattle in Seattle. But here this is the only time you have to spend with these people.

Harriet points out that spending time with San Andreseños is hard because of gringo cliques, but also because speaking English serves as a barrier to building friendships with locals. Harriet is not alone in feeling that language differences between gringos and locals

can make it even more difficult to build meaningful relationships. In my interviews I asked everyone what has been the most difficult thing for them since arriving in San Andrés and the most popular response by far was the inability to speak Spanish fluently.

In contrast to gringos who visit San Andrés to attend the *Eco-escuela*, which has the mandate of working to improve gringos' Spanish abilities, many of the gringo Volunteer Petén volunteers who did not speak Spanish upon arrival in San Andrés often did not feel that they had improved much during their stay. Betsey explained that much of the reason she never learned Spanish in town was because she could rely on other gringos in the group for translation:

So that was definitely the toughest thing was... sitting here being like yeah I don't know any Spanish... You know, it wasn't that I wasn't willing to learn, it was just I didn't need to. I was using everyone else as a crutch, kind of. So like I said, it's totally my fault and I know that Spanish is a language I probably should learn.

While Betsey blames herself for not making an effort to learn Spanish, Teresa became frustrated by what she interpreted as locals deliberately speaking in Spanish when they knew she couldn't understand. She said that she often felt that much of what they said amongst themselves was actually about her:

I mean ideally everybody would speak the same language, again, that's never gonna happen... I wish everybody understood more that, that there's a different language and... it's not nice to talk behind somebody's back, it's not nice to talk about somebody in another language in front of them... I think that's the biggest thing that has hurt me about... in my mind, you know, and this is gonna sound so prejudiced, and I don't mean it at all, in Hispanic culture, or in Spanish-speaking culture, like, I don't understand the language and there's been too many times when I've felt like people were talking about me.

Teresa articulates her discomfort with not understanding Spanish in terms of something that locals are responsible for. Language works as a double barrier to gringo-local

relationship-building for Teresa; firstly, it impedes communication, and secondly, it is used to bolster up the paranoia and stereotyping that she connects to Latinos and trash-talking.

Rolando and Dario both mentioned that they were particularly bothered by gringos who stayed in San Andrés without trying to learn Spanish. Rolando believed that there was no excuse for not learning at least some basic Spanish phrases. He felt that in order for the volunteer projects to have a positive effect on the community, the most important thing that gringos could do was to try to reach out and communicate with locals. Rolando believed that intercultural communication and understanding was an even more important component of Volunteer Petén than the work projects themselves.

Dario pointed out that although he believed gringos had an obligation to learn some Spanish in San Andrés, he did not necessarily believe that the language barrier was a reason for the scarcity of gringo-local friendships. When he arrived in town, he had high hopes that his fluent Spanish would foster an immediate camaraderie and closeness with his host family. But this was not the case; Dario ended up spending almost all of his free time only with the gringos in town. He explained his distance from locals by saying that volunteers were “under-appreciated” by people in San Andrés and that locals weren’t interested in friendship. It is an attitude that I suspect in and of itself could have acted as a barrier, which, along with Dario’s privileged class background, likely positioned him as somewhat unapproachable for most locals, despite his Spanish skills. Whatever the reason for his gringo stickiness, Dario’s example does hint that there is likely much more than a language barrier standing in the way of meaningful relationships and mutual understanding between gringos and locals.



Although many gringos in town greatly enjoyed hanging out in a group, several of them were at the same time wary of the practice and how it might exclude or even offend local people. Here are Marion and Jenna describing the oblivious, sometimes “obnoxious”, dynamic that can come with gringos sticking together:

Marion: One, like, I mean it’s not like really negative, but one thing that I can think of is like when a group of us goes to Santa Elena on a bus and we’re like all in the back... and we’re all like talking and laughing and like sometimes kind of loud, and like, probably obnoxious.

Jenna: Yeah. [laughs]

M: People like turn around and then you’re kind of like, oh yeah, like, we’re probably being rude.

J: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I think that when we get into a group, it’s sort of like a-

M: It’s sort of like-

J:-it can be like a little, like, intense, I feel like. Definitely like very noticeable-

M: Yeah.

J: -very like... loud...

M: like, “Oh they’re those...”

J: “Look at those people”, like.

M: “Look at those, those white people...”

J: “that are like, screaming and like...”

M: like...

J: “...being obnoxious.” [laughs] But I mean, I don’t know, I feel like that, that happens everywhere you go, it’s just like sort of more noticeable, I guess cause of the race thing.

Marion and Jenna both notice that their behaviour as a group of gringos on the bus was out of sync with the rest of the local passengers. The fact that they were in a group likely lead to an increased feeling of normality about their behaviour. This is in part because gringo groupings create norms and ways of being that are differently located in relation to those of San Andreseños. Within a large group of gringos, norms and behaviours that might normally stand out in San Andrés take on a more normalized quality. It is also interesting that Jenna mentions “race” as an aspect that serves to accentuate the

noticeability of rowdy gringo behaviour. Yet again, a multiplicity of factors – stickiness, race, wealth, etc – work in tandem to produce gringos and locals as different and distant.

Dustin also noticed racialized gringo stickiness in town and questions how locals might feel about it. But in contrast to Marion and Jenna, who explain gringo clique behaviour as not overly significant and “something that happens everywhere you go”, Dustin leaves the phenomenon of white viscosity somewhat unexcused and asks what effect it has on San Andreseño impressions of gringos:

Today I was walking down from San José and there was a white person walking on the other side of the street and he goes, well actually he didn't say a thing, but I said hi to him and like we started talking. It was natural for me to say hi to this guy I've never met because he's a gringo too. And I see the same dynamic go on within San Andrés and I wonder if it affects their [San Andreseños'] conception of how we think and how we feel about our surroundings here. Or if they think it's so natural for gringos to talk to gringos that they don't even think about it anymore.

Here Dustin is able to articulate the ways gringo stickiness takes on an especially normalized quality among gringos and he questions whether locals see it as similarly self-evident. Later in this interview, Dustin condemns the separation between locals and gringos as being a barrier to politicization and collective action. He argues that the most important thing gringos can do in San Andrés is to “build solidarity” by creating and nurturing connections and networks across barriers. He says that as gringos “our wealth affords us separation” and that it is crucial

to break down the barrier between our existence and their existence. We go home and tell all our friends what it's like. They get a sense of what we're like. They realize that we're just not some people in Hollywood on TV, and we realize that they're just not some people south of Mexico. So, I think it's, I think that's the most important thing. The most important way in which Volunteer Petén helps.

I was not expecting any of the gringos I interviewed to frame their presence in town in terms of “solidarity” and Dustin was the only one to do so. While his suggestion gives me hope that gringo-local encounters can be conceived of in less asymmetrical ways than the traditional “helpers” and “helpees” dynamic of volunteer tourism, I am also somewhat suspicious of Dustin’s usage of a language of solidarity. I worry that using this word is an attempt to absolve himself of the responsibility to change the exclusionary gringo practices that he’s identified in the passage above. By referencing “solidarity”, he implies that his presence is somehow morally superior to the other gringos’ who don’t frame their presence in the same terms, even if he doesn’t enact any changes in practice. As Nelson explains: “Recourse to a politics of solidarity can offer a space of innocence for the gringa, a site cleansed by good intentions and activist “politics”, from which we can still speak unproblematically of the Other” (1999: 57). Regardless of his claims to solidarity-building, there is no guarantee that what Dustin will tell his friends about San Andreseños will be any less problematic than the stereotypes about “some people south of Mexico” that he cites above. In Ann Bishop’s (1994) writing on the politics of solidarity work, she stresses that solidarity ambitions should start – and perhaps especially so for white western men like Dustin – with a personal questioning of how we are always already complicit in regimes of oppression. I feel that Dustin’s use of solidarity is quite different from the personal commitment to sustained political engagement that Bishop has in mind, at least as long as he leaves unquestioned his own role in reproducing the inequalities and gringo privileges that uphold the barriers between “us” and “them” that he talks about (Sundberg 2007). He assigns a degree of transparency to people in San Andrés by claiming that simply being in town is enough to understand what they are about.

*Seeing for ourselves*

Many gringos in San Andrés claim that their visit has helped them to gain a better understanding of local people. Kim, for example, explains that previous travels have led her to a greater appreciation and understanding of the cultural complexities in the places she visits. Dario too claims that traveling for the purpose of volunteering helps him to “really understand a culture.” The director of Volunteer Petén implies a similar interpretation in his belief that there are consciousness-raising benefits for gringos who engage in volunteer work rather than “just traveling”:

[In volunteering] The idea... is that you're not in Guatemala just to meet other travelers. You can, but you should think about, you know, what are the schools like? And you can. You can go right into any school you want and start working and teaching. You know, I kind of opened up that possibility... So this is one of the only chances anyone would get to come to Guatemala and be able to go, you know, into the community and just sit and observe and then actually participate in doing something or anything... I truly, truly believe that every human being from those [western] societies needs to do [volunteering]. Even if they come here and they did nothing, at least they came here to see. And they can absorb it any way they want, but at least they came here.

He believes that “coming to see” is in and of itself an eye-opening and beneficial experience for gringos in San Andrés. But it appears that the flow of such benefits would heavily favour gringos over local people. How is having gringos “see” them beneficial to local people? Are seeing and understanding really the same thing? I worry that claims linking seeing and knowledge assign a problematic transparency to the “culture” being gazed upon by outsider eyes. It is an inferiorizing move to position someone as an object to be viewed (Gregory 1999) or as “evidence” (Sundberg 2007). Many gringos expressed a modest desire to be in San Andrés as an “observer” (Pete) or a “witness” (Kim, Dustin), rather than a “helper”, but without unpacking the problems of how, first of all,

positioning San Andreseños as suitable objects to view or help has an Othering consequence, and secondly, how gringos are always already seeing things from a particular location to begin with, which renders impossible the idea of a neutral or innocent “observing” of local people as they “really” are.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Donna Haraway (1988) points out that claiming to know something in its entirety through vision is a “god-trick” that assumes a total gaze of mastery is possible. It is a move she associates in particular with a white western masculine power to know and speak on behalf of more marginalized people. There is no guarantee, then, that visiting San Andrés and “seeing” what goes on there will lead necessarily lead to an understanding of the processes of oppression that San Andreseños face, for example, much less of the important roles that gringos often play in such processes. “Seeing” does not mean that one’s own privileged position will come into view. In fact claims to see and therefore to know can underpin what Barbara Heron (2007: 28) identifies as a deeply colonialist logic in which to “know” is to control. There is a well-documented link between racialization, construction of Self and Other, and histories of colonialism (Stoler 1995, McClintock 1995, Heron 2007) that is easy not to see from a privileged vantage point.

The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes in which I voice my frustration with gringo desires to “understand” San Andrés and how it works:

I’m looking forward to stopping interviews soon because I’m tired of some of this gringo stuff. Things like trying to “figure this place out” instead of just reserving judgment are really getting to me. Yesterday I heard Dustin saying that it was easy to get to San José for free, you just flag down a car and hop out wherever you want to. I was cringing when he was telling other volunteers this, because obviously he should have offered something to the driver. Everyone here says a quick “*cuanto le debo?*” [“how much do I owe you?”] at the end of a ride. I know it could just be an innocent mistake but I read it as a reflection of a deeply selfish attitude: “The whole world is here

for me, to guide me, to make my life easy, to provide a picturesque backdrop for my hardcore adventure. I've figured this all out."

In this excerpt, I am reminded of Mary Louise Pratt (1992), who puts Haraway's god-trick specifically in the context of travel and calls such a vantage point the "seeing man" (9) and the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" (197), figures for whom "what they see is what there is" (213). This is by definition a white male subject position, and permits a "see-er" to imbue their vision with an unambiguous authority. Similarly, I felt that some gringo attempts to "understand" San Andrés were self-serving and self-congratulatory processes. I found that claims of "understanding" – such as Dustin telling other gringos how he "figured out" a local transportation trick – sometimes had very little to do with actual San Andreseño practice at all, and much more to do with gringo imaginaries of (a savvy, street smart, down-with-the-locals) Self.

Saldanha sees this kind of tourist self-imaging as intimately related to a personal quest for an "experience". He explains that:

[t]he authenticity of being on the road, the experience of being severed off from white urban modernity, doesn't always follow from communication with local peoples... The more you become acquainted with the transnational traveler circuit – its people, rituals, hardships, secrets – the more authentic and transformed you become. This doesn't necessarily entail increasing your knowledge of history or geopolitics. Talking about traveling experience, and greatly exaggerating the personal influences it has had, is a major factor in the formation of cliques in modern contact zones like Anjuna. (144-45)

Saldanha reminds us that such traveler claims to the authenticity or the depth of their "experience" often has little or nothing to do with local people. Nor do such claims necessitate an acknowledgement of the multiple reasons that travelers and locals are differently positioned to begin with. Quite the contrary, possessive gringo claims of "understanding" local-ness can be deeply imperialist moves.

It appeared to be something of a marker of status among gringos to “understand” San Andrés and be able to explain it to other gringos in the group. Local-ness, as an idea or an “experience”, is strongly desired among many gringos. Even though I mention above that almost everyone I interviewed felt frustrated by the lack of engagement between locals and gringos, this did not necessarily stop them from claiming to “know” what local life was all about. Many gringos, in fact, claimed not only to understand how locals lived, but claimed that they too were living a “local life” or that they were “like a local”. As Shin put it: “I think I live in Guatemala like they do. I live like Guatemalan people.” Here too is Harriet:

The homestay makes it less like tourism and more like living here, I feel like. Because you’re not just staying in a hotel and sight-seeing all day, like you’re actually spending your day in the community, with the community, living within the community. I don’t think that’s anything like tourism at all, actually, for me personally. I live here.

It is interesting to me that Harriet changed her initial claim that she is “living *with* the community” to the more distancing claim that that she is “living [separately, but] *within* the community” (my emphasis). The distance and barriers between gringos and locals that I’ve already talked about do not necessarily hinder gringo claims to being a local:

Jenna: Today I like woke up from my nap, and I’m like, I live in San Andrés and, like, I feel comfortable, I feel wonderful, like...

Marion: clean.

J: I feel clean, I feel like happy, I feel like I’m just starting to get acclimated and like now I have to leave... Going to Africa was like a totally different trip. I had never, I didn’t live in a community or anything like this. So this is completely, you know I’ve never done anything like this and I really hope that like seeing that I can be comfortable in a place like this and like all my friends and all these volunteers can live here and like just... life is normal, you know?

Jenna expresses a degree of both surprise and relief at finding that she and other “friends” and “volunteers” can feel “comfortable”, “wonderful”, “happy”, and “clean”(!) in a

“place like this”. She assigns an alterity to San Andrés, where cleanliness and comfort are not necessarily to be expected. Also at the heart of claims to “living” in San Andrés, however, is a denial of the multiple privileges that would prevent gringos from ever really “living like a local”. The fact that Jenna had her epiphany upon waking up from an afternoon nap is but one small and mundane example. Most local women of Jenna’s age have multiple family, work, and school responsibilities that do not leave time for a nap in the middle of the day.

Not all gringos framed themselves in terms of “living in” San Andrés, however; in fact, some were careful to point out that their presence in town is completely different from that of a local. In their interview together, Brody quickly corrects his friend Daniel when it appeared to him that Daniel was making a claim to local-ness: “At the same time you’re not a member of the community. Like, you’re definitely separate. You’re one of the volunteers. You talk to people in the community and you’re more social with them, but it doesn’t mean that you’re, like, really integrated.” Here Brody reminds Daniel that talking to people in the community is not the same as being one of them. His resistance to Daniel’s claim shows how gringo conceptualizations of San Andrés and their place within it are often very different. Gringos often interpreted their experiences in San Andrés very differently. While many sought to “know” and “understand” San Andrés or make claims of “local-ness”, others were more skeptical of such moves.

### *Cultural Differences*

One of the most common ways that gringos talked about their positions in relation to *Andreseños* was in terms of “cultural differences”. While such discussions were



doubtless intended to be informative and innocuous, there was often an insinuation that *different* ways of being between locals and gringos were not necessarily *equal* ways of being. Even from before the time that gringos show up in San Andrés, they are already encouraged to think about the place in terms of its “different culture”. Here is an excerpt from the Volunteer Petén website:

Women volunteers may find it very hard to adjust to the machismo culture of Guatemala. Machismo means that men can be as disgusting and rude as they want to women in public. Volunteers will hear cat calls, whistles, and the occasional shouting as they walk by. “Gringo” or “gringa” is also commonly used as foreigners walk by. But please keep in mind that this is part of the culture (as annoying as it may seem) and they are not intentionally trying to offend you (although they seem to try awfully hard). Although it doesn’t make it any better, try to keep in mind that all women (natives as well) have to deal with the machismo culture. (VP website)

In this framing, “cultural differences” such as “machismo culture” euphemistically disguise racialized stereotypes that gringos held towards local people. Such discussions of “culture” mask racist hierarchies, where the audience being addressed is assumed to be a culturally-neutral benchmark, in contrast to which Other (San Andreseño) ways of being are deemed “different”. In the passage above, the “part of the culture” being described is clearly positioned as inferior and backwards; with local men fixed as “disgusting”, “rude”, “annoying”, and “offensive”.

Although local men are positioned here as a major threat to women (both gringas and San Andreseñas) it’s interesting to note that two gringas cited this very passage from the website in their interviews, mentioning that it misled them to believe things would be much more chauvinistic in San Andrés than what they had found thus far. Jenna noted that one of the male volunteers in particular had been far “creepier” towards the gringas in town than any of the local men.

Ali Rattansi (2007) points out that many seemingly innocent discussions of “cultural differences” are rife with what he calls the “racism of cultural difference” (95): “Race operates in a whole variety of guises and with a myriad of taken for granted assumptions that have become embedded in public and private cultures in which ideas of nation, ethnicity, ‘way of life’ and other concepts have strong, and sometimes less intense, racial connotations” (99). “Machismo” is often used among gringos as shorthand for “Latino masculinity”. It carries what I perceive to be an often-essentialist conflation and reduction of Latino-ness, gender, and sexuality. Although framed as a “cultural way of life”, an idea like “machismo” carries strong racial connotations. In criticizing Latino “machismo”, the take home message from this website blurb is that the (unspoken but implicit) audience position of gringo is far more respectful and civilized in terms of gender relations. Nelson sees racism in allegations of Guatemalan machismo. Although she acknowledges the frustration she feels at being targeted as a gringa object of desire, she argues that we need to question the racialized and privileged underpinnings that are obscured within this “gendered outrage”:

The often erotic tension of being a gringa in Guatemala is overdetermined by the system of machismo – which can be scary, enraging, and violent... But I’m arguing that we need to address the ambivalence of these feelings and explore the way gendered outrage may justify what is in part a racist response and one that ignores the privilege that allows us to be there. (Nelson, 1999: 55)

Teresa invokes “cultural differences” in her interview, in ways that bespeak an implicit hierarchy. Here she has just mentioned that she notices different approaches to “school” as part of the culture in San Andrés:

I wonder how interesting it would be to take like a handful of kids from here and just throw them into schools somewhere else. And it doesn’t even matter if it’s in the US or Canada, in Mexico... because like Mexico has a completely diff... and from what I understand, a really good education system. They... it’s really good there. So just take a handful of kids and just throw ‘em into a

completely different education system, bring them back and see what would happen. I wonder if they would be completely turned off by it and be like, “I never want to go again”, or be like “Hey, you know, those people are getting things done and learning and that’s cool and it’s not a bad thing, you know, it’s a good thing you get to go places and do things and... you know, you can change your life.”

The implication is clearly that San Andreseño schools are inferior to ones in the U.S., Canada, and (even though it required a qualifier) Mexico, imagined as places where people “are getting things done and learning”. Although she mentions that San Andreseño students may or may not enjoy the experience of attending a Northern school, she never questions which system is superior; Northern schools would even give San Andreseño students a chance to “change their life” (though what is wrong with San Andreseño lives to begin with is never explained outright). In thinking through Teresa’s quotation, Heron’s (2007) comments are useful about the Othering inherent to discourses of “cultural difference” and how it bespeaks a hierarchical “development gaze” whereby “different cultures” are positioned inferiorly on the path towards “progress” with Northern countries leading the way:

This discourse [of Othering] normalizes our centring of ourselves in relation to other people’s needs, not by recognizing how we are implicated in global economic processes of globalization that underlie these needs, but by erasing the agency of local peoples who are Othered in these processes, and by presenting ‘our’ (read white middle-class Northern) knowledge, values, and ways of doing things as at once preferable and right, since the North appears orderly, clean and well managed in comparison. (3)

For Teresa then, not only is San Andrés positioned as backwards in relation to an imagined U.S.-Canada-Mexico, but there is also the suggestion – the invitation, even – that an intervening “helper” is needed to show San Andreseño kids the better way (*who* will “throw them into schools somewhere else”?). Teresa seems to be hinting that this

“intercultural exchange” should be taken up in practice: as mentioned in the previous chapter, she shared a desire to start an educational exchange program. This excerpt is thus partly a self-hailing as “helper”, partly an affirmation of Northern superiority.

The hierarchical relationship that is implied between San Andreseño ways and the ways of “home” takes on an increasingly overt racialized tone later in her interview.

Below, Teresa explains that she grew up in a largely Hispanic town in Arizona, which led to some bruising experiences growing up there as a white girl, but has ultimately made her more accepting of Latino culture:

I don't see anybody in Latin America of a darker skin and speaking Spanish as being any different, you know? I mean, I... people are people, I understand that but I also know... realize that people that are from other cultures that I just don't understand as well. So I'm more, more apt to be like, you know, “Tell me about your culture, and tell me about this, and tell me about that.” I hate... I don't like necessarily always talking about it because I hate sounding like “Oh poor me, I was a white girl in a Hispanic town and prejudice was always against me.” But I was definitely “that girl” on the bus who was different and they targeted, you know? It was like I hated riding the bus. I hated riding the bus because people threw things at me and called me names and said things to me in Spanish and I didn't know what they were saying, and it was just a terrifying experience as a... seven year old kid, you know? But I, you know, I got to a point where I got over it and I was just like whatever, they're just different, they don't understand, and that's okay. Now, Latino cultures are so comfortable for me. I can be in them so easily and not think it's weird or different.

Although she restates her approval of Latinos several times above, she also tells how as a child she hated riding the bus with bullying Hispanic students. She explains that she later came to a realization and acceptance of the fact that “they” had targeted her because they were “different” and “don't understand”; labels that not only position her as the “norm”, but also as both wiser and more well-mannered, culturally-speaking. Such gringo use of “cultural differences” masks condescending and ultimately Othering discourses about

Latin American people. “Different”, it appears, often stands in for “inferior” or “backwards”.

“Cultural difference” is also used by some gringos to address the issue of why it is that most volunteers come from western and whitened backgrounds. In her review of Lyons & Wearing’s (2008) work on volunteer tourism, Sara Koopman (2009) was concerned about the insinuation in one of the chapters that the whiteness of volunteer tourism should be attributed to “culture” rather than to colonial legacies. She explains:

The chapter by Pearce and Coghlan on the dynamics of volunteer tourism does point to the fact that most volunteer tourists are from Europe and North America, and not Asia and the Middle East, where there are, as they put it, “parallel pockets of affluence”. Rather than point to how this might be linked to a history of colonialism and mission work, their answer for this is simply cultural difference. (no page number)

In San Andrés, I experienced examples of this same line of thinking, whereby gringos are said to be “culturally” more inclined to do volunteer work than people in San Andrés. Twice with my interview question of “why is it easier for you to come here than for gringos to visit your hometown under the same circumstances?” there was a misunderstanding between me and the person I was interviewing. Both times, the participants were from the U.S. and assumed that I was asking something along the lines of: “why are you, as a U.S. American, more willing to come and volunteer in San Andrés than San Andreseños would be to volunteer in your hometown?” The way that they reframed the question put emphasis on the presence or absence of an “impulse to help others”, where as I had envisioned the question as a way of accessing ideas about unequal travel mobility between gringos and San Andreseños. My reading of the (mis)interpretations of this particular question is that they stem from the participants’

assumptions that gringos are more likely than San Andreseños to engage in the supposedly moral, helpful, and self-sacrificing act of volunteering.

Seemingly innocent discussions of “cultural differences” among gringos in town (or on gringo websites about the town) can open the opportunity to mark Others, while leaving the whitened western Self unquestioned and reaffirmed as superior. The imperialist underpinnings of racialized imaginaries – often subsumed, as I’ve mentioned, under the considerably less volatile label “cultural differences” – are crucial to tracing their current political implications and clout. The historical emergence of Self and Other are inextricably linked to the era of empire, when new ideas about self-fashioning and an increased attention to “the individual” (and specifically the ideas of the moral man and the self-made man) emerged in important gendered, raced and heteronormative ways (McClintock 1995, Heron 2007). All of the tropes I’ve mentioned in conjunction with “cultural difference” have long histories in colonialist imaginings: sexually licentious men, ineffective systems of education, ill-mannered youth, selfish or unhelpful attitudes towards others. I would argue that none of these are ideas that gringos “realize” for the first time in San Andrés; myself and most of my participants have been steeped in them for much of our lives. All of these well-worn discourses serve to position whitened “helpers” – whether they are the missionaries and colonizers of the era of empire, or the volunteer development workers in San Andrés today – as both justified in their material interventions, and as discursively reaffirmed in their “cultural” superiority. In many ways, it seems that yesterday’s “civilizing mission” has become today’s “making a difference”. This gringo baggage plays out in San Andrés in ways that normalize and naturalize processes of racialization and “cultural” hierarchy. Some gringos come here

especially determined to fight it, many become acutely aware of it while here, and many leave even more convinced of the backwardness of San Andreseños. Reactions are varied, but differences are always being made by gringos trying to “make a difference”.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In San Andrés, different kinds of ideas and identities condense around the term “gringo”. I have sought here to tease out some of the processes through which gringo identities are made and reproduced in practice, and ask what political repercussions might follow in consequence. That this identity position is riddled with tension is by now likely obvious; just as I have tried to suggest that “gringo” elides stable definition, so too do I argue that it can be problematic to overlook its historical emergence and its potential for resisting (neo)colonialism. There may be no fixed meaning here, but that does not mean that all meanings should be accepted equally. The multiple definitions of “gringo” and their respective political implications change and compete depending on who is defining and how. And while these mixed messages are not equal in their popularity or their power, they are nonetheless worth unpacking to question how “gringo” works, what is at stake, and for whom.

Above I have focused on six different aspects of gringo-ness – its relational emergence, its recurring patterns, its whitened connotation, its tendency to cluster, its privileged vantage point, and its power to name “cultural differences” – and have tried to suggest that each of these qualities is both under constant negotiation and rife with politics. The ways that different gringos in San Andrés practice and talk about these aspects is sometimes highly diverse; despite gringos in town being similarly located in

terms of whitened privilege and neocolonial baggage, their variable engagements with “gringo” also serve to politically inflect such locations just a little bit differently for each individual.

Being positioned as a gringo in relation to locals is not necessarily a precursor to engaging with the problematics of whitened privilege and imperial legacies, but I do think it can open such a possibility. Gringo stances of responsibility and accountability towards North-South inequalities depend on a politicized interpretation of this positioning, attentiveness to and respect for the perceptions of local people, and careful consideration of “gringo’s” multiple locations within historical and geographic webs of economic, racialized, and gendered power. That becoming gringo will unequivocally bring power asymmetries into view for gringos in San Andrés is far from a given. And yet, a politicized and reflexive gringo self-identification could provide a particularly appropriate and compelling starting point from which gringos could launch decolonizing agendas in San Andrés, and other North-South “contact zones” as well.



#### **4. Conclusion: Towards a Decolonizing Gringo Politics?**

While occupying a gringo position in San Andrés can offer the potential to open gringo eyes to inequality, at the same time there are many aspects of this positioning that also perform and entrench this inequality. Herein lies a contradictory tension: coming to San Andrés as a volunteer can produce experiences that will foster gringo politicization, but always through a practice that has deep colonialist roots. Visits can inspire new or strengthen pre-existing gringo commitments to social justice, even as the act of gringo travel is in many ways a manifestation of whitened privilege. Below I will explore some of the challenges, barriers and possibilities of using politicized gringo positioning to resist systems of domination and work towards decolonizing the relationships that come into being in the contact zone of San Andrés.

##### *No Guarantee*

There is, of course, no guarantee that gringo visits to San Andrés will necessarily lead to an acknowledgement or understanding of North-South inequalities, much less to a stronger commitment to decolonizing strategies. Even if gringos in San Andrés do see and want to change the injustice of North-South relationships, they can still secure a space of personal innocence for themselves by framing their presence as “helpful” or “in solidarity with”, while leaving their own complicity in configuring unequal relationships uninterrogated. In the words of Koopman (2008: 297), speaking as a solidarity activist: “We ease our conscience, and are thereby less compelled to look at other intimate daily

ways we participate in and perpetuate systems of domination.” Or gringos may feel trapped by guilt; a reaction that Nelson (1999: 69) explains as actually being a further reinforcement of gringo superiority: “... the self-flagellation of the ‘mea culpa move’ deeply reinscribes the power of white North Americans and the powerlessness of everyone else”.

Among many of the gringos that I met, there was a desire to purge “gringo” of its imperialist connotations and imbue the identity with “new” benevolence and humility. But long-established colonial patterns are alive and well in the contemporary contact zone of San Andrés, a fact that is often overlooked in gringo-led attempts to change the meaning of gringo-ness. One such colonialist imaginary that continues among gringos is the trope of “development” being hierarchical and teleological in nature (here, different “cultures” are positioned at different stages on an evitable and identical path towards progress/modernization, with Northern people leading the way). This framing is pervasive in the North and often appears to have achieved something of a self-evident, common sense status. That this discourse came out in interviews, such as Teresa’s (mentioned in chapter three), and everyday conversations with some gringos was not necessarily surprising. But then, there were also many gringos who were disturbed by the implication that Guatemala and Guatemalans were positioned as inferior to or “less developed” than Northern places and people. Some articulated their commitment to social justice and rejected the idea that the North is qualitatively “better”. On a purely discursive level, Dustin and Rolando carefully framed their volunteer “help” in terms of it being an egalitarian cultural exchange rather than a paternalistic looking-down-upon. Catherine and Nancy took the imperialist histories embedded in “gringo” very seriously;

they felt that gringos in San Andrés would be well-advised to reflect on such negative associations, rather than pretend they no longer apply. Carly took care to connect whitened power and privilege to racist geographical imaginaries that gringos often unknowingly perpetuate. She also put her beliefs into practice by engaging local young women in a critical dialogue about the privileging of whiteness.

Many of the discourses that inferiorized San Andreseños seemed hard for these and other social justice-minded gringos to challenge outright, however, firstly because this rhetoric often appears innocent and is so normative that it can be easy to miss, and secondly, because of a widely-shared concern for preserving gringo group harmony. Borrowing from Saldanha (2007), the “stickiness” of gringo bodies in San Andrés often took precedence over the expression of dissenting political opinions. And although gringos were diverse in their worldviews and political inclinations (with a few, as I’ve said, claiming a political agenda to disrupt the idea that “west knows best”), no one that I spoke to questioned their entitlement to show up and feel welcome in San Andrés – whether purportedly there for helping, for relaxing, or for learning Spanish – in the first place. Some gringos assumed that the nobility of their “progressive” individual intentions, like Dustin resorting to a politics of solidarity, were sufficient to trump the problematics of their positioning within broader power geometries. In this way, some gringos carved out a space of innocence for themselves by rejecting the idea that home was in any way superior to San Andrés and modestly claiming that they were here more for “the experience”, wanting “to learn”, or merely “to observe”, rather than having illusions of grandeur that they would be “making a difference”. Though they discursively severed themselves from what they perceived to be the more overtly imperialist rhetoric

that “San Andreseños need gringo help”, their gringo identity and the fact that they felt entitled to show up at all precludes an easy “getting off the hook” in terms of broader North-South inequalities.

*Positioning for Politicization*

I saw reflections of myself in some of the “politicized gringos” who tried to distance themselves from Othering discourse and adopt a position of humility vis-à-vis San Andreseños, but I remain troubled by the absence of accountability and responsibility that comes with a tendency for my and others’ “progressive gringo” self-image to problematically coincide with self-exemption from neocolonial projects. Lisle elaborates:

Indeed, all tourism encounters – even supposedly ‘ethical’ ones – are saturated with the existing power relations endemic to cultural difference, and are continually generating new subject positions that enact new power relations... What we require, it seems to me, are more... *ambivalent* understandings of tourist encounters that force us to confront our *permanent complicity* in the structures of inequality, injustice and violence we spend so much of our time trying to alleviate. (2009, no page, original emphasis)

But for wannabe “progressive gringos” like myself, the power that we carry within our passports, money belts, and whitened bodies – the incredible privilege implied by the very circumstances of our presence to begin with – belies any easy assertion of innocence, no matter how progressive we feel ourselves to be. As Bonnett (2005) and others have argued, there is no easy escape from whiteness and all its weighty baggage, though Saldanha (2007) and Heron (2007) point out that the temptation to believe one has risen above power geometries is often particularly strong when whitened subjects are away from “home” and in the spaces of the Other. I recognize that any hope for a decolonizing gringo presence in San Andrés must begin with a “contact zone”

perspective and its insistence that, for gringos, who they are is never separate from their multiple positionings in relation to San Andreseños; connections that will in all likelihood position gringos like me quite differently from how we are used to imagining ourselves. The belief that gringos can transcend politics, race, and history simply by claiming a progressive agenda is a dangerous luxury that many whitened subjects can easily slip into by virtue of our privileged positions. Whiteness needs to be not only recognized, but evaluated in terms of how it might be practiced differently. As Anzaldúa has pointed out, “Challenging the old self’s orthodoxy is never enough; you must submit a sketch of an alternative self” (2002: 559). It is my belief that new ways of being gringo are indeed possible that motivates me to put this identity position under the microscope in the first place. I hope that this critical examination of gringo politics will not be perceived as futile; but rather as an attempt to dissect in order to envision how things might someday work differently. In this project, I’ve turned to the possibilities of using gringo positioning as a tool of methodological, theoretical, and practical decolonization by employing it to articulate a moment when whiteness is both revealed as vulnerable and problematically powerful, and making it harder to ignore the (neo)colonialism that is intricately woven into gringo identities.

### *Critical Gringo-ness*

If there are benefits at all to having volunteers show up in San Andrés, I think they have little to do with “helping”. After all, San Andreseños have been building their own schools and helping themselves for decades. If there are benefits, I think it’s that gringos in San Andrés are given a chance to see things differently, our positions vis-à-vis

local people bespeak injustices and personal complicities that can be turned away from or engaged with and called into question. This is what Saldanha (2007) describes as a new tourist ethics, whereby being confronted with alterity forces a critical and politicized self-examination. For him, this means allowing yourself to be destabilized by another's alterity, seeing his or her difference not as a threat but as a resource to question your own position in the world.

Bonnett (1997) mentions a promising example of a growing critical awareness of whiteness that comes from Aotearoa/New Zealand. He describes how many whites have chosen to employ the Maori term, "*pakeha*", in discussions of their racial identity. Bonnett sees the change as a reflection of "significant rethinking of the identity of white 'settler peoples' and demonstrates their preparedness to give up the privilege associated with the unmarked term" (198). This signals an important movement away from naturalized conceptions of transparent whiteness towards a reflexive, and politically engaged white racial identity. It makes me wonder at potential critical deployments "gringo" to similarly mark whiteness and destabilize the past and present racialized (neo)colonialisms that it continues to underwrite, as a way of moving towards decolonization and greater equality "wherein skin color, genitals, AIDS, hunger, obesity, beauty, wealth, and speed connect in less predictable ways than they do now" (Saldanha, 2007: 207). It was by virtue of my gringa-ness that I was able to come to San Andrés in the first place. It is by tracing the ways that whitened privileges and neocolonial complicities underpin gringo imaginaries and actions – even these often remain invisible to many of the gringos who pass through San Andrés – that I see inklings of what a decolonizing gringo politics might mean.

I've tried to be careful throughout this thesis to show that gringos are heterogeneous in their reactions to the differences that come to light in San Andrés. In this story, there is no absolute correlation between gringo-ness and a necessary disregard for imperialist processes. But neither are there definite recurring patterns of gringo politicization here. Rather, there are some who have sought to find a place of resistance when gringo privileges come to light, and some who do not. Although I've argued that for my participants and I, privileged gringo vantage points in particular can obscure the ways that we are complicit in systems of inequality; this does not render politicized gringo engagement impossible. Instead, it means that it must be deliberately sought and requires committed effort. A small handful of my participants – Evan, Pete, Carly, Rolando, Dustin – provided clues as to what such engagements could look like. All of them mentioned that the privileges associated with “gringo” come with a responsibility to question them. Even if their practices are not without problems, they at least hint at how gringo visits to San Andrés could be framed less as “helping others” and more as a “coming to consciousness”; an opportunity to gain new awareness of the workings and consequences of North-South encounters, with an eye towards new tools for politicization, resistance, and holding whiteness accountable for its role in global inequalities.

### *Self-Help*

In San Andrés, politicized engagements with gringo-ness are not only important in terms of increasing social justice for local people. In fact, framing gringo decolonization as a benevolent act that benefits and empowers only San Andreseños

misses the mark; it perpetuates a “good helper” role for gringos, and it also ignores the ways that gringos too are liberated when inequalities are resisted. Anzaldúa talks about how racism is usually framed as detrimental only to people of colour, leaving the ways that it is damaging to white people unexamined. “The refusal to think about race (itself a form of racism) is a ‘white’ privilege... Though many understand the racism perpetrated by white individuals, most do not understand the racism inherent in their identities, in their cultures’ stories. They can’t see that racism harms them as well as people of color, itself a racially superior attitude” (2002: 564). The problem that Anzaldúa identifies means that white attempts to resist racism are usually imagined as something to be done on behalf (and to the benefit) of other people, rather than as an act of self-liberation. But as some critical race scholars have long pointed out, whites too are disempowered and dehumanized – in different ways and to different degrees – under systems of racism. First published in 1965, James Baldwin’s essay “White Man’s Guilt” traces anti-Black racism in the United States, connecting the adoption of a white racial identity to a loss of selfhood and an entrapment. He explains how the horrific histories of exploitation that underwrite white identities can result in a kind of deep personal paralysis, whereby white people become

impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world. This is the place in which it seems to me most white Americans find themselves. Impaled. They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence.” (Baldwin, 1998: 321)

Roediger (2002: 17) reminds his readers of the emancipatory potential of moving beyond whiteness when he recalls Alice Walker’s offering of a “gift” to white men: the choice to decide who they really are, *other* than “white man”. The narrowness of white masculine



identity and the shameful violence upon which it is historically founded make Roediger's plea for "nonwhiteness" an appealing alternative for those who occupy whitened positions and who feel a commitment to social justice.

Geopolitically too, it is not only those who occupy marginalized positions in relations of power who are harmed by inequalities. In speaking about the politics of North-South solidarity work in the Americas, Sundberg (2007) argues that "locating suffering in the bodies of Latin American people risks obscuring the ways in which United Statesians are shaped by 'empire as a way of life', wherein state funding, popular culture and subject identities are harnessed to support militarization at home and abroad" (160). She explains that the negative effects of U.S. imperialism and neoliberalism are detrimental to almost everyone in the Americas, not only to the Latin Americans who are usually positioned as its primary victims: "Although the effects are felt unevenly, citizens in the South *and* North are affected by reduced government spending, privatized services, and de-regulated industries brought about by neoliberal restructuring and free trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)" (162). When gringos can't see the ways that neocolonial and racializing forces disempower and dehumanize them along with San Andreseños, then their commitments to social justice risk being laced with what Sundberg (2007) identifies as a seductive "saviour" role. Because this role necessitates an inferiorized Other, an always already "victim", the framework reproduces and perpetuates imperialist thinking even as it tries to challenge it. For gringos like myself, attempts at gringo politicization should therefore start with a rigorous personal questioning of the oppressive positions we occupy, and of how we are also oppressed by such positioning. Decolonization therefore starts with an honest

account of how moving towards greater social justice is liberating for all, not only for those who have been traditionally positioned as the “victims” of imperialist thinking.

The messy politics of gringo positioning can lead to a variety of different reactions and interpretations among gringos in San Andrés. My attempt to trace this identity under a critical gaze led me to engagements with feminist methodologies and a shared conviction that “critical analyses necessitate critical methodologies” (Sundberg 2007: 146). My own positionality and investments in this subject matter a great deal and inevitably colour the kind of research I produce. I came to recognize the multiplicity of voices, places, and ideas that inform my co-produced data in ways that both troubled and reinforced the power relations between “researcher” and “researched”. That I choose gringos, as opposed to locals, for the subjects of this project was a deliberate attempt to employ a critical methodology that calls into question a subject position that often evades investigation. Gringo identities are often deemed problematically-self evident and their consequences benign in gringo imaginaries. But just as gringo identities can afford opportunities to emphasize gringo innocence and exemption from systems of inequality, so too can they provide a new perspective on critically questioning gringo positions in the world. For me, adopting a critical gringa identity – in theory, in practice, in research – involves a continual questioning of how I come to be positioned as a gringa, what the many meanings of “gringo” tell me about the things I can and cannot see, and how I might re-work this positionality in more empowering ways. This critical line of questioning demands a recognition of and an engagement with the political implications

of “gringo”, for gringos and for many others who hold a stake in gringo identities and practice.

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