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Odede/Posner Final Reflection

One of the most impactful things I took away from the book was its messages about what the role of Westerners should be in community improvement projects abroad, especially in countries in the Global South. I had recently been doing some research into “voluntourism” and its oftentimes net negative effects on communities, as it is often coordinated by companies that give none of the program fee to the community, and done by students who are unqualified for the work they are doing for the community (such as poorly building housing or interacting with children with no concept of the effects of their presence on the children’s psychological wellbeing.) To me, the book suggests that this work is best done by members of the community itself who can best understand what the community’s most pressing needs are, and often the position of Westerners who want to help is most effective when it takes the form of financial support. In the book, this was especially achieved from Jessica’s position as an American college student who possessed knowledge about which financial grants were available in America and was eligible to apply for them.

However, Jessica ended up occupying some sort of in-between position, as she had experienced living in Kibera to see the community’s needs firsthand and put effort into building relationships with local people who could help her understand what Kibera’s most pressing issues currently were. When her family visits Kibera, they experience the culture shock and confusion that Jessica experienced upon first arriving, and we can see that Jessica has clearly moved past this view based on her comfort level relative to that of her family. On the other hand, Jessica still lacks the life experience to understand Kibera’s needs as at deep of a level as its residents can due to her positionality of an American college student who has spent her entire life

with access to wealth, and deferred to Kibera's residents to help her understand their needs. For example, when Jessica drew up architectural plans for the new school, she designed them with environmentally green features. However, a local architect ended up scrapping many of these features in favor of optimizing the design to the specific resources available and to the specific area of the land that they were building on. Another thing that complicates Jessica's experience in my mind is how she acted upon her initial arrival. She tended to discount the advice of Kibera residents that was meant to keep her safe; her refusal to listen skips over the dialogue and reflection pieces of intercultural praxis. However, her blunders ultimately led her to understand the community more and be able to do better work for the community, which made me feel conflicted as how to see her previous actions.

It is a bit more difficult for me to apply what I've learned from this book to my immediate future plans, as I plan to study abroad in Spain (or potentially Argentina) where my focus will be on language study rather than community improvement projects. However, it is always possible that I'll end up doing some volunteering there in any capacity, in which I can keep this lessons in mind! In any case, it definitely helped me think more critically about volunteer-focused study abroad, and if I end up doing anything similar after college, these are lessons that will be useful to me.