**Disclaimer:** the blog prompt #2 led me down a path that I’ve never attempted going down before. I realized, early in, that I would fail to present a condensed and cohesive blog post within the constraints of time/space/assignment, but I couldn’t resist the attempt. What I am posting here is a rough beginning of a longer draft outline. It represents one of several bodies of memories I have as a foreigner from a ‘dominant’ or ‘privileged’ position. And is one of which the reading in this course, the last two weeks in particular, have caused to re-emerge. The larger draft is outlined to reflect three different micro-locations at three time-periods, and although they are all within the same general region of Western Indonesia and in response to the same natural disaster, to me, they different significantly. Here I have included only a shortened version (believe it or not) of location #1.

**A Problematic (IN)Dominant Categorization of a Borderland: The “Shallow Pond” of Stagnant Tsunami Water**

“Perhaps if their situation becomes completely intolerable and we can do something about it at reasonable cost, we may even have a duty to intervene” (Appiah, 153).

“Charitable giving in the wake of the tsunami of Christmas 2004 was remarkable and heartening; but…” (170).

**Summary from (a)location:**

**A.** September 28, 2014 Wikipedia search: “2004 Tsunami”

The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake was an [undersea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Submarine_earthquake) [megathrust earthquake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Megathrust_earthquake) that occurred at 00:58:53 [UTC](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coordinated_Universal_Time) on Sunday, 26 December 2004, with an [epicentre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epicentre) off the west coast of [Sumatra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumatra), Indonesia...The earthquake…triggered a series of devastating tsunamis along the coasts of most landmasses bordering the Indian Ocean, killing over 230,000 people in fourteen countries, and inundating coastal communities with waves up to 30 meters (100 ft high). It was one of the [deadliest natural disasters in recorded history](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_natural_disasters_by_death_toll#Ten_deadliest_natural_disasters_of_the_past_century). Indonesia was the hardest-hit country, followed by [Sri Lanka](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka), [India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India), and [Thailand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thailand).”

**B.** Out of the estimated death toll of just over 230,000 people and over 1.5 million people displaced, over 165,000 of those deaths and over one third of those displaced people were in Indonesia. It is not surprising that majority of the media coverage in the United States was on Thailand. One can’t be too annoyed. Many U.S. citizens were taking vacations there at the time. There were terrifying and heartwarming stories to be shared as well as actual footage. Focusing on Thailand drove up the ratings. It drove up the charitable contributions. I wonder what coverage was more effective elsewhere. Phuket is a pretty big tourist location. As they say in Indonesia: *“Ada gula ada semut.” Where there’s sugar there’s ants,* meaning,common people are attracted to interesting events.

It is equally unsurprising that Sumatra Indonesia did not make for good coverage. Indonesia is made up of over 13,000 Islands, only three of which are of particular interest to Western foreigners. There is a large missionary tradition in Papua. Java holds the capital, Jakarta, which is considered to be very cosmopolitan. And then there’s Bali, well, apart from being a gorgeous and close-range vacation spot for Australians, it is a well prepared paradise for expatriates who like to surf, write books and paint pictures. That’s why it got bombed in 2005. Indonesia is extremely diverse, over 52 languages are spoken island wide, but apart from its main city, Medan,

Sumatra, on the other hand, especially the North West tip, known as Aceh Jaya, that was wiped out, had been, prior to the Tsunami, had been without a tourism or a “Western presence” since roughly 1976. ‘Officially,’ the primary reason for this inaccessibility was the instability caused by “The Free Ache Movement,” a group of separatists who are referred to, by the Acehnese, as “GAM” (Geraken Aceh Merdeka) and to the Indonesian government, the “Aceh Security Disturbance Movement.” Un-‘officially,’, Aceh is considered to be, by those without and within, a religiously conservative Islamic society. The GAM were fighting for the maintenance and preservation of their values. How many Acehnese were on or off board is ‘unknown.’ People, of different religious faiths and ethnic backgrounds, including predominant public Islamists figures, believed, for a variety of reasons, that the tsunami was divine punishment. Whatever it was, it brought in a flurry of the foreign. GAM reluctantly reached peace agreements approximately one year after the disaster.

**C.** After the waves hit, that locals described as a “dark cobra rearing its head,” it took three days for help to come. “The Australians” say they were there first. But so do “The Americans.” In either case, to hear the story from a local official who was near the water, searching for the bodies of family and neighbors from amongst the rubble, that whoever it was, at the time it was like an alien invasion. looked and sounded like a terrifying alien ship unlike anything they had ever seen landed on shore. What he was actually describing was a military hovercraft, launched from a U.S. aircraft carrier. But to him, to the Acehnese, having been shut off from the world and in the earliest stage a trauma few can relate to, they *were* aliens. The Indonesian government took longer to arrive, though it is difficult to get an official confirmation. People with whom I was acquainted said it took 10 days.

**D.** I arrived in Aceh 6 months after the disaster—as “3rd wave” of relief. I had just defended a thesis for an MA in Gender Studies, when I was offered a job coordinating the opening of a “women’s vocational training center,” for widows of the tsunami. I was the “perfect fit.” Single. Young. Western. I was “well-educated,” an MA in “women’s issues.” I had “international and crisis work experience.” And most of all, I had a “big heart.” I was, also, a Canadian atheist woman, who had just written a thesis called “(Re)conceptualizing Utopian Movement”—completely built on abstractions—and was going to work for an overtly Christian organization, predominantly comprised of Americans to address the needs of women in a country she knew nothing about. I couldn’t imagine what I could possibly have to offer, but I felt compelled to do what I could and was excited by the interesting opportunity. For a “white trash” Canadian, first of her family line to get a college degree and one of very few to leave the country, this was an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.

**Location #1: Meulaboh 2005**

**Description:** By the standards of foreign aid workers, Meulaboh was a little bit on the “hardcore” side, but “not quite hardcore,” especially that long after The Tsunami. A foreign aid work could only access the town via a 4-6 seater aircraft that took high-standing to arrange. When a foreigner fell ill, he/she had to be evacuated out. But, there was clean water, plenty of delicious food stalls and, if you wanted to, you could avoid ever seeing an IDP camps (internally displaced people of people.) Structures were still standing further inland, so there were places for NGO (non-government organizations) to set up, and they did. Local property owners moved in with extended family and charged exorbitant rent. The NGOs paid. The NGOs would fight to outbid each other, to get the best ones, which drove the prices up further. Locals could no longer afford rent. Overhead costs for relief projects were increased.

**People groupings :** Organized not in order of my perception of rank, but rather by my degree of confidence in categorization. All too telling.

**1. ‘My’ NGO** (which we will call XX)

**‘My’ NGO consisted of:**

**a. The Foreigners:** All Christian. Well, except for me. But note, despite being faith-based, their work was entirely relief and development based in nature, as opposed to evangelical. All were well-educated, and most had relevant work and educational experience. No one was making much money, by their standards, but they weren’t spending money either. All of their jobs were, back home, considered to be nobel, courageous, and exciting. Unlike non faith-based NGOs, what they were doing “overseas” was referred to as a “missions trip.” The group was predominantly American—including a Korean-American, Chinese-American, there were a few Canadians, a German, and an expatriated Brazilian. The majority had little to no interest learning the language. There were translators for that, and they would only be here temporarily so it was a bad use of energy.

The minority learned as much as they possibly could, if not to ease the tasks of their day, to show respect for the culture, or because he/she merely loved how cool it made him/her look.

There was a comeraderi laced with an unspoken competitiveness. You won if you were “on the ground” sooner, had been there longer, had more previous experience in similar situations.

**Me vs a.** This is the to category to which I ‘belonged.’ Though I wasn’t a Christian, which was perceived to make me weak. For reasons I still don’t understand, I failed to bond with other people in this category.

**b. The Missionaries:** There were the missionaries that had invested their lives in Indonesia area long before the disaster. They spoke fluently, they knew people, they ‘understood’ the culture. XX used them.

The hardcore Assimilators: These people weren’t at all what I had expected. They completely defied my assumptions about “missionaries.” They were the very rare foreigners who had somehow assimilated themselves into Acehnese community, they were well respected and integral parts of their community. After the Tsunami, they were not only forced into association with the “Western invader,” but were guilted into “partnering” with Christian NGOs. Many of them tapped out and tried to keep distance. Some of them, after the fact, suffered assault from their Acehnese community due to their affiliation with the infiltration. There life’s work was destroyed.

The Expats with a Mission: I’ll admit, I only knew one by this time (I have since met others), but she deserves an entire subcategory—“Catherine.” She was the wife of a wealthy British venture capitalist who lived in an enormous house in South Eastern city of Medan. She held a bible study for well-educated Christian, mainly Chinese-Indonesian whom she affectionately called “her girls.” She agreed to partner with our NGO, because her affluence and residency gained XX easier access through a myriad of bureaucratic channels. She was highly suspicious of the influx of aid, thought our team, in particular, was a disaster of its own and fought for control. She fought. And she left a trail of foreign product managers behind her. Including me.

**Me vs b.**

I nicknamed one of the Hardcore Assimilators, “my guardian angel.” He was from my home town, he helped me in indescribable ways, he was my father figure. In contrast, “the Expat with a Mission,” among other things, thought I was devised a coup against me at the vocational training center and later laughed at how horrible I looked when I was being transported due to a mysterious illness many months later.

**c. The “Nationals”** : Appriah’s “collective obligation” (164). All Christian. XX would only hire them if they were. They were the “well-educated,” somewhat “westernized,” who had been hired by XX from other parts of Indonesia to come and help. They lived and worked, side-by-side with the Foreigners. Their salaries were generously based on the income standards of their local economy, skills, training and experience. It was less than the Foreignors. But, like the foreignors, their jobs were considered as noble “mission” work, were considered to be well-paid, and, in addition, working for a foreign aid companies was considered very prestigious and paved the way for travel and residency in the West.

**Me vs c.**

This requires a gender distinction:

**Males:** My relationship with the guys was jovial. We didn’t mix on any close basis. I knew other girls from other NGOs that had relationships with them (one recently married).

**Females:** My category as a female foreigner, generally speaking, had an amiable, simple and unequal relationsip with the female national. It was friendly. They kept to themselves, for the most part, and the foreigners did too. The foreign women practiced their authority with confidence, without a thought it seemed. And it seemed to work very well for them. The Female Nationals appeared to *adore* the foreign men, in particular. They were overtly polite, flirtatious, laughed at every joke, went above and beyond their job descriptions to be helpful. For me, it was hit or MISS. I shared a small room and every minute of my day with a National for three months in location #3. Just the two of us and the local men that we managed. She was my stronghold. We made it. But that was very rare. Here in Meulaboh, my authority was questioned, my intelligence mocked, I had to stumble my way through tasks that weren’t part of my job description. They stopped talking when I entered a room. They stole my clothes, wore them openly and denied that they were mine. I asked the laundry ladies, with awkward gestures (I did not yet know much of the language, and my household translators were my thieves) to place my clean clothing in a separate, hidden place. I suspected the Acehnese ladies wouldn’t tell the Nationals about it. I sensed that they didn’t like them very much because they spoke with an air of superiority. I also surmised, though it troubled me, that this is why, unlike me, the Nationals and other Foreign Women were so much more successful in maintaining their authority. The laundry ladies and I, nevertheless, enjoyed our little secret. We were in cahoots.

“They will come to see that they are not helping us but following our lead” (107). Was I the “they”? Had I come to “see”? At least a little? And was the lead to be followed the Nationals, the Acehnese? Did I, as most of the female Nationals thought, see me as a threat? They saw me getting paid more, stealing the attention of the foreign men, doing a job that they could not only do, but could probably do better? Was our unity hard to forge because we had too much in common. It only accentuated the difference?

**d. The Acehnese Locals**: These were the people that lived in the community, but were employed by XX. They were our security guards, our drivers, our cooks, our cleaners, our electricians and sometimes our buffer. They were all muslim. We respected their religious practices and they respected, if not protected, ‘ours.’

**Me vs d.**

**The men:** I was what I always thought of as a “third sex.” Meaning, within reason, they did not expect the things from me as they did from Acehnese women. They gave me allowances. Example: my big white calve exposed to all the security guards as I clumsily get off the back of the truck. If I showed that I was trying, if I shot them a horrified, apologetic glance when I messed up, they were gracious. Amused even. After all, they weren’t worried about my negative influence on them. But I had to remember that they were quick to disapprove. Especially when it came to my interaction with Aceh women. I was not to be an example.

**The women:** There were far fewer local females employed by us. In this location I had minimal interaction with them. I had entered a home/office situation where the domestic machinery was already at work. Since training and instructing them wasn’t part of my job at this point, I interacted with them outside of work (without a translator) and so we were limited to smiles. I would say “Teriah Kasi” “Apa Kabar” “Salamat Pagi Ibu Ibu.” Terms of polite exchange. They were always friendly. They seemed undisturbed by my presence in a room. They were silently accepting if I sat on the floor with them and peeled shrimp in silence while they told stories in the local dialect. They taught me how to wear a hijab. They liked giving my outfits a nod of approval or a shake of the head. They cleaned my room even when I told them they didn’t need to and saved me plates of my favorite dishes when I was late to dine. They didn’t expect anything from me, it seemed. They seemed grateful that I acknowledged their existence. Sometimes it made me feel like an asshole, sometimes it made me feel grateful in return.

**e. “The Beneficiaries” or “The People”** – see the last in the list of “others.” They were the reason we were there. The remembrance of them was what kept us motivated. Tough day? Remember the people. The Bupati (local official) won’t allow you XYZ? Remember the people. Always an effort to remember the people. They were everywhere. They worked for us. They sold us our food, our gasoline. We were inhabiting their space to help them. Why were they so hard to see? Who were ‘they’? What did they really want?

These were the people I saw the least, and I was with them far more than many of my coworkers ever were. Perhaps due the nature of my position? Or because I insisted on it? I don’t know. ‘My’ beneficiaries were, very often, the only people that I liked spending time with. I guess you could say it was because they made me feel good about myself? Because I had a savior complex? If that’s the case, it sure didn’t feel that way. Was I romanticizing them? Objectifying them for the pleasure of my own spectatorship? Maybe they were only kind to me because they appreciated my efforts? I don’t know. I do know that, at least in location #1, this would be my most positive exchange with the “people.” Later, in the GAM region, there would be strikes. Angry mobs of armed men would hold ‘us’—foreigners, nationals, local employees alike—hostage in our makeshift home because, in our effort to help them experience the pride in ownership, were making them work to hard to build their homes. The tools we were providing them with to do so were not good enough. They were angry that we fired men that were cutting corners making brick and pocketing the money. The money that was going toward their homes.

**2. All the Others:**

**i.** For group **a**, the Other includes a little bit of **c** through **e**, sometimes **b**, and occasionally **a**.

For group **b**, it was **a**, **c**, **d**, and, by default, **e**. But just because they’re “missionaries.”

For group **c** the other was **a**, **b**, **d** and **e.**

For group **d** it was obviously **a-c**, but sometimes not as much **c**.

For group **e** the other was everyone except themselves, and a tiny bit of **d** was growing.

“…we are coming closer to identifying the fluidity and complexity of our transnational moment, where migration, travel, and diaspora can no longer be clearly distinguished by intention and duration, or by national citizenship and belonging” – Shu-mei Shih.

**ii. The non-Christian NGOs:** There were other nations presented in Meulaboh: Germany, France, England, *Indonesia.* But if they had no “faith-affiliations” it seemed ‘we’ did not interact with them. Unless it was at a UN OCHA meeting. I couldn’t blame my coworkers. This work was hard. You are catching a country at its lowest moment. A time of pure turmoil. People’s lives and livelihood are literally depending on your work performance. There is no beginning or end to the work day. As you rest, you worry about whether the batio (cinder block) you’ve been overseeing the construction of is of good quality. Or if it will crumble like sand in the next earthquake. Housing people in a death trap. And then there is the cultural hurtle. You struggle to speak and understand, you rely on the translations of a practical stranger. There is no time to process. But you push on because you know, unlike the people of this country, there is an end to this. You will leave the rubble behind (though I later learned this is not the case for all foreign aid workers.) My coworkers had little time to socialize, and when they did, they wanted comfort, familiarity, connection, community. Even if it was feigned. They filled the gaps between each other easily. Hungrily.

**Me vs ii.** I didn’t have access to non-Christian NGOs until my third relocation, during which ‘they’ became ‘my’ community (see location 3). But ‘my’ people seemed resentful, weary of their power—they had more money, more experience, more government involvement, more resources. But they also had less respect for the local culture. The had liquor shipped in, which was forbidden in Aceh. And they consumed it openly, had parties, let off steam, Western style. There were stories about foreign women wearing bikinis on the beach. Bikinis. In a place where women were covered head to toe and wearing hijabs. Bellies, thighs out in the sun, trampsing about in the local communities site of trauma, in a way that violated their beliefs. Over time I came to realize that the Christian approach, please let us gather in worship quietly, but we will respect your values to the utmost of our ability, actually gained respect at times.

**iii. The Acehnese people we/I didn’t know & me vs iii.** They may have been employed by an NGO, or may have been benefiting from a program, who knows. But these were the people, we, I, did not know. They were the families piled on motorcycles, the shop owner smoking on their front steps, the women padding her face in bright white powder, the young boys walking to the mosque. Like other countries I have been, I was looked at. Very freely looked at. I was the subject of obvious and open conversations that I did not understand. *Unlike* other countries, however, there was no curiosity or entertainment behind these looks and conversations. And there was certainly no reverence. If there was an assumption that ‘we’ were more educated, a people of higher standards of living, unlike other countries, it did not guarantee admittance into the ‘very important guest’ category. Leads to that awkward and undeserving celebrity

treatment, here, it had less than no value. This made sense to me, I was undeserving of the celebrity treatment solely du to my country of origin. But beyond this, far beyond, there was resentment, disgust, distrust. A tangible tension. I was an invader. An unwelcomed guest.

Sometimes I wanted to beg for forgiveness. Other times I wanted to scream in their faces. Always, I wanted to disappear.

**Post-Category Complications:**

One night, an Australian coworker who was rarely in Meulaboh (she worked mainly in the much more hardcore location #2) was there. We disliked each other very much. I couldn’t stand her stereotypical ‘Aussie’ style, she had a nickname for everything, ‘mozzie,’ ‘ciggie’…everything. She had been in country for 6 months and only knew how to say thank you. And she said it very poorly. And I, well, the American boss that *she* liked, like *me* instead (we’re married now). But we had recently been deprived of Foreign female bonding another and made due. Although our NGO outlawed partaking in the vices (even while not in Muslim territory), we snuck around to relish in the occasional cigarette. We snuck a company truck out and drove to the nearby beach. There wasn’t a building around. Complete darkness. Silence. Privacy. We had barely had a third drag, when we heard to swarm of motorcycles and saw the rapid approach of their headlights across the land where the tsunami ruble had been cleared away. I don’t know what we said to each other, or how long it took us to realize we needed to get the hell out of there, but on their feet around the truck with bats and sticks before Leslie had closed the passenger side door. When she saw the bats, now that a few men were visible in the head lights and from the interior light spilling out the door, Leslie froze up. And when they saw us, they froze too. Until I reached over Leslie, slammed the door closed and put the truck in motion. The began yelling and chasing. But were soon left behind. We drove straight back to our living quarters. Shaking. And we told no one. We should have known better. But we were unspeakably surprised nevertheless.

About two days later, we overheard a conversation among foreigners in our office. It was about a series of attacks on people by a group of men taking Sharee’ah law into their own hands. Local Emums had been teaching that infidels were trying to destroy their values, women were starting to walk about freely without their hijabs, men and women were sneaking off into the darkness together. It couldn’t be tolerated. A national couple had been beaten nearly to death just last night. Leslie and I looked at each other. They must have been surprised to see two girls.

This was their country. But who was that? GAM? The young Indonesians Christians from Java? The imum who shouted ragefully about ‘us’ from the loudspeakers of the Mosque? The woman who lost her husband and children and is trying to use this time of turmoil to gain the right to own her own shop? And what are we really doing here? Does it matter what our motivation is? What if we hadn’t come? Have we done more harm than good? How can we know? They didn’t ask us to come here, the Tsunami did.

As Gloria Anzaldua writes about the oppressed and marginalized Chicana, “we are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we’ve made some kind of evolutionary step forward” (103). Who can this ‘we’ include? How do I find my way there? Despite my place of dominance and privilege? Or am I simply guilty of what Shu-Mei Shih describes as “…this logic of narcissism and dismissal of the other, all marked by supposedly well-intentioned liberal soul-searching and guilt-induced critical self-reflection” (79).