

## **In Looking “We” Become: Neoliberal Giving and Whole Planet Foundation’s Faces of Poverty**

by Anushka Peres

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Abstract:

This paper explores the production of photographed faces as representations of poverty in neoliberal contexts. I analyze the ways in which photographs of particular faces are used on the Whole Planet Foundation website as an apparatus of the neoliberal state that produces and sustains a culture of charity. Such a culture depends on the production of neoliberal volunteers/donors/subjects—gift givers—as model citizens. Rather than challenging structures of inequality such practices sustain conditions of precarity and reproduce such logics.

Keywords: charity, whole planet foundation, poverty, photography, precarity, gifts

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Sometimes when I feel like shit, I go to Whole Foods Market to feel better. This paper begins with my most recent experience at Whole Foods, which was remarkably similar to every other experience I have had there. I entered the store feeling tired, stressed out, and somewhat annoyed, but I found myself oddly soothed by the store's atmosphere. The consumer experience appealed to my sense of smell, sight, and even justice.

I wandered through the aisles, wooed by the beauty and order of the stacks of shining multi-colored peppers, the array of lavender-scented hand creams, the sample cubes of cave-aged gruyere and cloth-bound cheddar, and bars of dangerously dark chocolate. I debated my purchases, and when I finally made a decision to buy three items, I headed to the checkout counter, trying not to feel guilty about spending so much money on so little food.

The cashier told me my total; it was over eighteen dollars. I never spend that much money on a meal at a restaurant because I can't afford it, but for some reason spending the money at Whole Foods seemed more acceptable. I sighed and took out my credit card.

"Do you want to round up to the Whole Planet Foundation?" the cashier asked. In that moment, my attention was captured by a photograph of a beautiful woman of color, smiling next to the words "improving lives with every purchase." Even though I know better than to trust or believe advertisements, this one said exactly what I wanted to hear: at Whole Foods, my individual consumer choices make other people's lives better. Without thinking, I responded yes, slid my credit card through the machine, gave Whole Planet Foundation the gift of my donation, and left the store feeling a little better than when I entered.

Once I regained my senses, I was moved to think about my experience at Whole Foods. Why do I shop at Whole Foods even though I can't afford the products? Why did I donate to an organization I knew nothing about? Whole Foods has branded itself as a healthy and environmentally- and socially- conscious corporation. Its ethos is not only informed by the visual and spatial rhetorical practices of the store, but also in part by its corporate social responsibility programs, such as Whole Planet Foundation, that attract Whole Foods consumers like me. As a white, queer, cis-gendered femme in my early thirties, I can see myself in the consumer base of Whole Foods Market and also on Whole Planet Foundation's website.

According to the website, Whole Planet Foundation (<https://www.wholeplanetfoundation.org>) strives to alleviate poverty around the world through microcredit opportunities geared towards communities that produce the goods sold by Whole Foods. The organizations are linked through their target audiences and geographic product development, and they fall under the same corporate banner. WPF extends Whole Foods' multicultural globally-conscious ethic. Like the store, the website also uses photographs of smiling women of color, which has the effect of constructing neoliberal US citizen subjects who

donate monetary gifts to the foundation in order to contribute to and sustain the apparent success and happiness expressed in the photographic portraits.

Although these images appear positive, photographs can enable violence and docility. In this paper, I explore the production of photographed faces as representations of poverty in neoliberal contexts through a Marxist lens informed by visual cultural studies, post-structuralist feminisms, and scholarship on the gift. I analyze the ways in which photographs of particular faces are used on the Whole Planet Foundation website as an apparatus of the neoliberal state that produces and sustains a culture of charity. Such a culture depends on the production of neoliberal volunteers/donors/subjects—gift givers—as model citizens. Rather than challenging structures of inequality, such practices sustain conditions of precarity and reproduce its logics.

### Gifting the “Power of One”

Neoliberal practices and logics can be reproduced through corporate global poverty reduction programs under the guise of gift giving, as is the case with Whole Foods Market’s donor-funded nonprofit organization, Whole Planet Foundation. According to its website, WPF supports global “microentrepreneurs” through a microloan program. Employing an individualistic ethos, WPF attempts to “empower” people (see Whole Planet Foundation), mostly women in poverty by supporting their entrepreneurial endeavors through monetary gifts. Donors may believe they are acting selflessly and that Whole Foods Market and WPF care for and about people in need, but even seemingly altruistic donor gifts, like these, may have unintended consequences. In her forward to Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift*, Mary Douglas suggests, “there are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions” (in Mauss ix). Indeed, the gift of microloan support comes at a cost, one that reproduces neoliberal values and investments. In this section, I bring together literatures on neoliberalism, microloan programs, and the development gift in order to begin to analyze the ways in which WPF functions and what is produced as a result.

Neoliberalism, according to David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). Neoliberalism suggests that human rights are linked to economic policies that are based on the assumption that individual business opportunities and reduced market regulations can support individual interests like health and happiness. Building from Gramsci’s notion of “common sense,” Harvey offers everyday experiences as the means through which consent to neoliberalism takes place, a consent that, he notes, historically shifted “embedded liberalism” to neoliberalism (40-41). Even though neoliberalism seems to be about economics, it gained and continues to gain traction by appearing to be natural or normal. Wendy Brown advances this notion in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, saying that neoliberalism is “an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life” (30). Neoliberalism takes the onus off of powerful

companies and conglomerates and places responsibility on individuals, many of whom already face precarious circumstances, including poverty.

Neoliberal corporate poverty reduction programs based on microcredit and/or microloans, like WPF, unite economic systems with individual freedoms and global justice enterprises, ultimately supporting the production of a small and wealthy elite class. Christine Keating, Claire Rasmussen, and Pooja Rishi suggest that “microcredit approaches are deeply grounded in the political rationality of neoliberalism that seeks market-based solutions to a wide range of problems and deploys a justification of individual liberty and responsibility” (164). In practice, however, the neoliberal logic that develops and sustains microloan solutions to poverty provides different results. According to Keating, Rasmussen, and Rishi, such programs may also cause increased debt (160-61), invite shifts in certain gendered dynamics while also aggravating gender norms (166-67), and provide too temporary a solution to a much larger problem (170-71). These scholars also identify feminist critiques of the pervasive microcredit discourse surrounding women’s empowerment. They say, “some critiques stress the ways that microcredit is deeply imbricated in the process of neoliberal globalization and exemplifies the co-optation of feminist goals of empowerment for neoliberal ends” (160). Such rhetorics reduce understandings of women’s empowerment to market based visions of success and, when linked with claims towards feminism, may prove to be racially problematic and indicative of what some would consider anti-radical uses of the term. Furthermore, microcredit programs may not meet their proposed goal of reducing poverty. Instead, they “contribute to an overall reshaping of the political and economic landscape that often deprives those most in need” (171). Microcredit appears to be a seemingly moral quick fix to world poverty and often to global gender inequalities, a perceived solution that may in fact exacerbate the situations it intends to alleviate.

Whole Planet Foundation participates in the reproduction of such a system. Donors give money to a microfinance institution that offers loans to poor individual entrepreneurs who then use the money to start a business. Regardless of their success, individuals have to pay back their loan(s). Whole Planet Foundation’s microloan program participates in a kind of gift economy whereby monetary donations become re-payable capital in an inherently neoliberal system that is geared not towards those in need, but rather to those who donate.

Whole Planet Foundation donors hold and yield power by “helping” those in need. On the surface, this kind of donation may appear to be a gift that does not require reciprocation, but as Mauss argues, gifts exist in a kind of system of exchange within which they yield returns. As he says, when gifts are given, recipients are called into a cycle of attachment, with an “obligation to reciprocate” (10). Gifts necessitate other gifts. Power structures are mobilized and circulated through the process of gift exchange. In their article, “The Development Gift,” L. R. Stirrat and Heiko Henkel unpack the complexities of donor gifts in the context of non-governmental organizations (NGO). Building on the work of Mauss and Jonathan Parry, Stirrat and Henkel articulate the ways in which donations to NGOs often appear to be given “freely” and without the promise of return, which produces impersonal (often non-existent) relationships between donors and recipients (72). Most NGO gifts are “not a thing but money, itself a universalistic abstraction, which allows and indeed requires giving to be asocial” (72). In these situations, long-term social

engagements built on personal connection are seemingly impossible, and as a result, gift return—like NGO gifts themselves—may take “the most abstract and [...] universalized” forms (79).

Katy Gardener further examines distant relationships between donors and donor recipients in her related work on corporate social responsibility (CSR) gift economies. Suggesting that CSR programs attempt to bring ethical dimensions to business practices, she considers how corporations frequently put forth “moral economies of disconnection” that often exist in tension with local contexts’ possible valuing of “moral economies of connection” (497). Whole Planet Foundation addresses this experience of disconnection, offering donors a one-sided possibility for personalized engagement.

WPF does this by providing opportunities to make donors feel connected to recipients, locations, and monetary growth. Visiting its website, I noticed that phrases like “The Power of One” function alongside opportunities for donors to make seemingly personalized choices about their donations. Donors can decide which global region to support and the number of people they want to help. They can also see how their donation becomes greater capital for more recipients over time. A five-dollar donation, for example, is projected to turn into \$255 by the year 2066, which helps a total of 1,012 people. These calculations are not explained in detail. Whether or not the figures are valid, such estimations and captions appeal to and reproduce neoliberal logics, providing the possibility for donors to feel responsible for various aspects of their donation, including imagining a future in which a donor gift continues to be relevant and generous for years. Here, “The Power of One” applies to individual donors and to considerations of donor recipients. The gift of donation on WPF’s website thus reproduces neoliberal systems through a donor’s power to personalize donations and also to perceive poverty as an individualized condition that can be changed through individual business investments. The website thus produces a vision of ethically-minded neoliberal citizen-subjects through the act and gift of donation.

Whole Planet Foundation’s website also attempts to build personalized relationships between donors and those who animate its mission as recipients of microloan support. The website homepage displays a slideshow of photographic portraits of women of color. Under each photograph, a caption locates the subject geographically and informs viewers of their names and profession. Feza, for example, lives in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where she sells tools. Clicking on these photographs brings viewers to a page titled “Who We Support.” On this page, viewers can learn more about these individuals and their stories. In this gift exchange, partly mediated by the website, donors are invited to feel a connection to loan-recipients and perhaps a sense of responsibility for their success. However, donations to WPF are not given directly to individuals. Instead, donations go to microfinance institutions (MFIs). Even though the website’s rhetoric implies person-to-person financial support, donors quite literally finance financial institutions rather than individuals. Such strategies suggest that a person-to-person connection exists only imaginarily for viewer/donors. Donor recipients do not appear to be extended even similarly imaginary possibilities of connection to donors. And still, deep returns are expected and made visible in part through the portraits that WPF website provides.

## “Who We Support”

Neoliberalism produces and is produced by CSR microloan poverty alleviation programs, like WPF, through donor gift-giving. In the case of WPF, donor gifts are partly enabled through website photographs and captions. Such photographs may be used as common sense tools that promote neoliberal rationality, ultimately functioning to further stratify social classes, extend problematic gendered dynamics, and contribute to processes of racialization. Such logics are often so normalized that they become invisible. In this section, I aim to make them visible through an analysis of a photograph from the “Who We Support” page of the WPF website.

Before I begin this analysis, further attention to my own positionality seems necessary. Although my age, current financial status, and sexual orientation may differ from that of most donors, I acknowledge that I also likely share particular qualities with WPF’s target audience as I am a white, environmentally-conscious, educated woman from an upper middle-class background in the US, who cares about making the world better and who does, at least on occasion, shop at Whole Foods Market. I enter my analysis through this lens and through that of a trained photographer who is invested in the persuasive capacities of photographic images and processes, particularly as they relate to social/environmental justice work. Rather than criticize viewer donors or speak *for* donor recipients, I aim to investigate the ways in which such images communicate to viewer/donors and create viewer/donors as model neoliberal citizen subjects through the act of giving. It is my hope that a visual rhetorical analysis may help “influence the meanings and uses assigned to the images that fill our day-to-day lives” in an attempt to see neoliberal systems at work, even in moments that appear to be purely moral or generous, like donor gift-giving (Sturken and Cartwright 46).

When I began to research WPF, I scrolled through the website and was immediately drawn to this photograph of “Florentina.”



Fig. 1 "Photograph of Florentina, a WPF microentrepreneur." <https://www.wholeplanetfoundation.org/entrepreneur/florentina/>

This image presents Florentina as a neatly dressed, middle-aged, perhaps Mexican woman of color, smiling as she holds up an American flag. She stands next to a series of hanging bandanas, jewelry, and plastic knick-knacks in wooden baskets. According to the caption, "Florentina runs a business selling specialty gifts and apparel from Mexico." This caption begins to tell a story about Florentina, but one that is limited and ambiguous. For example, it is unclear who and/or what is from Mexico: Florentina herself and/or the goods she sells? When I first saw this image, I assumed that Florentina was from Mexico, but I learned elsewhere on the website that she actually lives in New York and is/was the recipient of a microloan. As a viewer, I had generated a perhaps stereotypical story of Florentina based on the ambiguity of the image, its associated caption, and its context alongside other website photographs. What seems clear, however, is Florentina's apparent success, a success interpreted and made visible by WPF website photographs. Microloan recipients reciprocate donor gifts through a photographed appearance of success.

Although the image and associated caption create a character of Florentina, the Florentina who exists on the website may not actually exist in real life. As Susan Sontag recognizes in *On Photography*, photographs may appear to be objective true depictions of reality, but aesthetic trends, tastes, and ideological and cultural contexts inform the way an image is created and produced (6). Sontag says, "in the situations in which most people use photographs, their value as information is of the same order as fiction" (22). While a photograph makes something visible, it cannot tell a complete story. Photographs hide aspects of lived experiences and photographic processes (23). For example, on the WPF website, viewers do not know if (or how

much) the photograph of Florentina was staged and/or who was responsible for creating the pose, or the scene. What role did Florentina play in articulating the image of herself? Was WFP solely responsible for its development? Sontag says, “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like power” (4). This photograph may exemplify Sontag’s point about the unequal nature of the existent power relationship between photographer and subject.

Viewers also do not know whether the image portrays an actual microloan recipient or a model or whether and/or how the captions relate to the image presented. Florentina then—in this analysis and on the website—is a persona created through photographs and brief captions, rather than a living person. It would be interesting to investigate the photographer’s intentions and/or the processes used to create this image, but for the purposes of this paper, I focus instead on the results of the image, on what ideologies are mobilized and reproduced through this image, this persona, this particular representation of the microloan recipient Florentina.

The image of Florentina suggests that she is invested in the United States. When I look at the photograph, I see the palette of US patriotism running through the image. Although other colors are present, reds, whites, and blues are prominent. Red, white, or blue objects appear to be sold in what I assume is Florentina’s stall. These objects stand out—a red stuffed animal, a white key chain, a blue bracelet. These colors are present not only in the objects in the image, but also in Florentina’s appearance. Her teeth and fingernails are bright white, her lips are red, and her shirt is blue. The use of color in this image conveys a distinct patriotism that may link the viewer, perhaps someone like me who lives in the US, to Florentina through a shared appreciation of US-American values and ideals. In this image and in a similar one of her on the website, Florentina embodies and performs a variety of norms: she sells crosses, women’s clothing, and the US flag (which she quite literally stands behind). Such items can contribute to a patriotic and normalized citizenry, and she herself looks pleasant, patriotic, and modest. This image establishes Florentina as both exceptionalized and ideal. In what follows, I focus on Florentina’s perceived economic status and emotional state, perceptions that contribute to a characterization of her as a minoritized icon. Such an analysis suggests that this photograph, and others like it, benefit donors.

This photograph implies that Florentina is someone who appreciates US American values, ideals, and norms related to religion, gender, sexuality, class, health, and happiness. Although viewers cannot know much about her financial status, her appearance in the photograph leads me to believe that Florentina does not currently suffer from the a/effects of poverty. Many pieces of jewelry—a necklace, earrings, rings, and a watch or bracelet—accessorize Florentina’s outfit. Her nails are polished, maybe even French-manicured, her top is a bright turquoise color, and her hair is neatly pulled back. Such an appearance may lead viewers to believe that Florentina is a woman who spends money on her appearance, donning visible markers of her apparent financial success. The website does not indicate exactly what economic criteria qualify someone for a microloan or what, if anything, WFP provided or purchased for the photo-shoot of Florentina, but this photograph appears very different than photographs from other poverty relief campaigns, such as Save the Children. Florentina does not appear hungry, sick, or physically

exposed in this photograph. Rather, she looks like a lower-middle-class consumer. Here, class difference can be regarded as sameness. This similarity benefits Whole Planet Foundation donors who, upon looking at this image, may see themselves as having given Florentina the gift of economic upward mobility.

The image also suggests a link between Florentina's assumed financial status and her emotional state, both of which appear to be the results of Whole Planet Foundation's microloan program. Florentina's beaming smile is located almost precisely in the middle of the photograph. Perhaps it is unsurprising that a photograph of a face includes a smile, but racialized and gendered histories of such smiles are often erased and are important to remember. Whole Planet Foundation's collection of similarly produced photographs of people of color working their way out of poverty and smiling should not be removed from a lineage of stereotypical, violent, and racialized colonial images of people of color smiling for the camera. Photographs of smiling women have a history associated with particular models of femininity, in which women are conceived of as proper when they are not disruptive, angry, or critical—in which women are seen and not heard, silent but smiling.

In this image, I see Florentina's apparent happiness as a commodity and the result of her economic status, produced, in part, by the good will of the WPF donor gift. Sara Ahmed says in *The Promise of Happiness* that happiness is a feeling and a state of being, but also that it is associated with objects—objects that accrue “affective value as social goods” (21). She calls the objects that positively affect us “happy objects.” Sometimes these objects are contagious—certain objects become happy objects by association with other happy objects. Following Ahmed, people are often made happy by things and thus assign ethical or moral value to them. These objects “become happiness pointers, as if to follow their point would be to find happiness” (26). Florentina's happiness, itself an object of, in Ahmed's terminology, a happiness imperative, appears to be the product of many objects, perhaps the objects she sells in her store, objects that Whole Planet Foundation donors enabled her to purchase.

Through these objects and through the economic advancement that likely followed the purchase of them, viewers assume that Florentina's life has changed for the better. Viewers may assume that Florentina's impoverished past did not include happy objects or material possessions since she likely couldn't afford them. Whereas, in the photograph, she is surrounded by objects often associated with happiness: the clothing she wears, the US flag she holds, the Christian crosses hanging in her store. These objects are associated with a series of social norms regarding her performance of gender, race, class, and religion. Ahmed says, “Attributions of happiness might be how social norms and ideals become affective, as if proximity to those norms and ideals creates happiness” (11). Florentina may be closer to social norms because of the support of Whole Planet Foundation donors. Donors made her (and likely themselves in turn) happy by providing her with the financial ability to not only purchase happy objects, but also to perform normative behaviors by surrounding herself with these objects. Her happiness is not only a happiness imperative, but it has also become a commodified object, a happy object that can make donors happy in turn.

This happiness, however, comes at a cost. In this image, Florentina could be considered a minoritized icon. In *Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Lauren Berlant explains that “the national minority stereotype makes exceptional the very person whose marginality, whose individual experience of collective cultural discrimination or difference is the motive for his/her circulation as an honorary icon in the first place” (104). In this photograph, Florentina is established as a woman of color who appears to identify with processes of Americanization, whereby Americanization functions through perceived adherence to normative characteristics—those most often espoused by white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian men and women (Berlant 192, 205). This photograph of Florentina is one of many “‘positive’ images of national minorit[ies that] represent both the minimum and the maximum of what the dominating culture will sanction for circulation, exchange, and consumption” (Berlant 104). Florentina is presented as an acceptable and exceptionalized minority. She appears to be a model of success. However, the image presents Florentina’s success as the result of the gift of WPF donor support. Her merits, work ethic, intelligence, character, and business acumen are not mentioned in the photograph’s caption, nor are they made visible in this photograph. Such qualities may be further denied for Florentina because existent racialized and gendered logics suggest that she did not become and could not have become successful without WPF donor support. Unfortunately, this position as a minoritized icon within a neoliberal system may never allow Florentina to experience the acceptance of citizenship that moves beyond essentialized difference (Berlant 36).

The image also presents questions about the rest of Florentina’s story. Her skin color, coupled with the context of the global microloan program and the ambiguity of her photograph’s subtitle, may lead viewers to believe, like I did, that Florentina is from, or was born in, Mexico. This imagined narrative could invite viewers to further fill in Florentina’s story, perhaps like this: with determination, perseverance, fortitude, and help from Whole Planet Foundation’s consumers, perhaps Florentina was able to make a life for herself in the US. Because her voice is absent from the website, the image may lead viewers to believe Florentina’s story is that of the nationally dominant fantasy of immigration: Florentina pulled herself up from her bootstraps by investing in all that the U.S. has to offer—including norms represented by the items she sells in her stall. Through this promise of acceptance and success, Florentina appears to have earned upward mobility, allowing her to climb the social ladder. However, even this fictionalized story is challenged by the realities of citizenship. Citizen is often read as white, middle-class, and heterosexual (Berlant 18, 36). Regardless of her status, Florentina may never be coded as a US citizen by viewers of this photograph. This photograph and its caption then function to reinforce a separation between citizen and immigrant, skin color and economic status. According to the logic this image perpetuates through its ambiguity, citizens aren’t poor, but immigrants are; citizens aren’t people of color, immigrants are; US citizens do not need microloans, but immigrants from Mexico do.

This racialized logic, the systemic process of minoritization, and the identity-binds that emerge in tandem contribute to what Jasbir Puar references as “the ascendancy of whiteness” (25). Elaborating on Rey Chow’s scholarship, Puar says that the ascendancy of whiteness works with an ideology that locates “difference within sameness” and “difference containing sameness”

(25). It is often justified through multicultural claims to diversity through which “multiculturalism” is “defined and deployed by whiteness” (Puar 31). In this way, the ascendancy of whiteness works to separate people of color who take on particular normalized white identities from other people of color who do not. Puar says, “the ethnic aids the project of whiteness through his or her participation in global economic privileges that then fraction him or her away from racial alliances that would call for cross-class affinities even as the project of multiculturalism might make him or her seem truly and authentically representative of his or her ethnicity” (31). Although such subjects may be held up as icons from a specific racialized, gendered, or cultural group, they cannot embody those traits entirely. In this image, difference is recognized as sameness, but difference can never actually be sameness. Even through economic advancement and adherence to particular norms, Florentina will always occupy the space of the other.

Viewers can look at this image and view Florentina, perhaps inadvertently, as a minority icon. She may be seen as identifying with a “small cluster of privatized normal identities” that showcase her sameness as exceptional, as ideal (Berlant 192). But Florentina is not solely responsible for the qualities viewers appreciate in her. Instead, the very things viewer/donors appreciate about Florentina are the things viewer/donors appreciate about themselves and those they imagine having helped her establish. They are the things viewer/donors created in her as a result of the gift of the microloan. So really, when donors support Florentina, perhaps unknowingly, they also support the neoliberal state and ultimately they support themselves.

### In Looking, “We” Become

A subject is constituted by an other, by who and what the subject is not. As Judith Butler explains, people are tied to each other. She says, “these ties constitute what we are [...] the attachment to ‘you’ is part of what composes who ‘I’ am” (22). Subjects need an other in order to maintain a self. Losing the other means losing a self.

Looking, at this photograph then, becomes a productive act. The “Who We Support” page interpolates viewers and donors into the Whole Planet Foundation and the Whole Foods Market corporate community. In looking, “we” are constituted; in looking “we” become. Through this culture of charity, donors may become champions of microloan recipients. Helping the impoverished other through the act of giving allows donor subjects, like myself, the opportunity to feel good, to feel like responding “yes” at a checkout line or clicking a link may create positive global change. In this reflection of the self in a culture of charity, a neoliberal subject may be more willing to suspend critical capacities or let go of them, even momentarily like I did, to become what Berlant identifies as the infantile citizen—a “citizen who has a memory of the nation and a tactical relation to its operation. But no vision of sustained individual or collective criticism and agency accompanies the national system here” (51). When people look at the photographs on the Whole Planet Foundation website, they might see a vision of themselves as a generous champion, perhaps even a savior, reflected back to them. But really, this vision might enable infantile citizen subjects who do not utilize their critical capacity or see larger

systemic flaws. Such images may also produce subjects who hold great faith in a particular version of the nation and in the moral codes and rational logics that support it.

Organizations like Whole Planet Foundation recognize global inequality and boast a rhetoric of change, but they ultimately enable and constrain docile subjects, whose very docility, very lack of critique, gets in the way of actually making change. As Stirrat and Henkel note, “the surplus that is available for the giving of gifts is the product of precisely the same system of production, exchange, and distribution that produces the poor who receive these gifts” (80). The impoverished other is necessary for gift exchange to occur. It seems that donors/viewers/consumers are caught. Instead of changing systems, “we” are served by them and sustain them by giving.

Letting go, even momentarily, of the ability to question norms and critique neoliberal logics and gross inequalities may be easier than confronting the ways in which “we” are implicated in the systems that produce these inequalities; giving can feel good, but also it is a mode of survival. Without the precarious other, subjects lose the possibility of becoming the generous gift-giving savior self.

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