A Postcolonial Analysis of Peace Corps Volunteer Narratives: The Political Construction of the Volunteer, Her Work, and Her Relationship to the ‘Host Country National’

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A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER NARRATIVES: THE
POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE VOLUNTEER, HER WORK, AND HER
RELATIONSHIP TO THE ‘HOST COUNTRY NATIONAL’

by

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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A Postcolonial Analysis of Peace Corps Volunteer Narratives: The Political Construction of the Volunteer, Her Work, and Her Relationship to the ‘Host Country National’

Thesis directed by Professor Karen L. Ashcraft and Associate Professor Lisa A. Flores

This thesis analyzes how Peace Corps recruitment practices and materials construct narratives of Peace Corps experience in terms of nation, race, and gender. In addition to nine Peace Corps recruitment pamphlets and one book of returned volunteer stories, I collected data through ethnographic methods. Analysis of this data focuses on how these narratives relate to, serve to (re)present, and potentially (re)construct the volunteer, her work, and relationship to the ‘Host Country National.’ Using a postcolonial lens, I explore the degree to which these Peace Corps narratives serve a neo- or anti-colonial function. In addition, I analyze my own implication in the neocolonial process and discursive reinforcement of hegemony by engaging with postcolonial self-reflexivity in my writing. In Chapter II, I aver that Peace Corps recruitment materials serve to reinscribe the normative American as white-bodied. In Chapter III, I argue that the way volunteers construct narratives of ‘effective service’ centers American perspectives and functions imperialistically. Additionally, I argue that this narrative is ruptured, and the neocolonial implications destroyed, when the intercultural relationship is centered rather than the American, or indeed the Host Country culture. Next, in Chapter IV, I argue that the American exceptionalism necessary to have the ability to ‘empower’ others is based not only on Americanliness, but also whiteness and masculinity. Finally, in Chapter V, I argue that the Peace Corps experience itself, though based in privilege, creates the possibility for subverting dominant narratives.
Keywords: decolonialism, international aid, intersectionality, masculinity, Peace Corps, postcolonial theory, whiteness
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Last year, 2011, marked the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the United States Peace Corps. Over the past fifty years, more than 200,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in 139 countries (Peace Corps, 2012b) helping work toward the Peace Corps’ three goals of:

1. Helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.
2. Helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.
3. Helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. (Peace Corps, 2008b)

To many people in the United States, “the Peace Corps symbolizes an ideal form of American altruism” (Hall, 2007, p. 53), a ‘pure’ type of international aid, divorced from political concern and hidden governmental motives. However, others note that though this symbolic vision of the Peace Corps may seem ‘ideal’ to the Americans who enact it, volunteers also “contribute to the ‘Othering’ of the global ‘South’ that begins with the patronizing portrayal of ‘overseas’ communities as implicitly in need of aid and unable to help themselves” (Polonijo-King, 2004, p. 105). This tension between the ideal of altruism, of selflessly assisting international neighbors, and the problematic assumption of the incapable international ‘Other’ on which it lies is often noted, but rarely explored. Many scholars have asked whether or not the Peace Corps is imperialist – and to what extent – in a given historic and geographic context (Cobbs, 1996; Hall, 2007; Milligan, 2000), but how the Peace Corps comes to be imperialist (or not) is left unexplored. When one considers that, ultimately, it is a rather loose configuration of individual volunteers who enact the Peace Corps experience, it makes more sense to ask how volunteers construct narratives of what Peace Corps ‘should’ be like, and how volunteers embody the (un)fulfillment of those narratives in the field. Thus, this study analyzes the discursive
construction of expectations concerning Peace Corps service, and how returned volunteers describe the meeting of those expectations with the reality of the field, paying special attention throughout to invocations of the international ‘Other’ (officially referred to by Peace Corps as the ‘Host Country National’).

In laying the groundwork for this thesis, I begin by outlining postcolonial theory and the postcolonial literatures that I draw from, situating my own study within the interdisciplinary postcolonial literature. Following this, I describe how postcolonial theory has been employed thus far in the communication discipline, and specifically in the subfields of intercultural studies, organizational communication, and rhetoric. I then explain how this particular study can be valuable as an addition to the postcolonial literature in the field of communication. From there, I move into a discussion of methodology and data analysis, concluding with an outline of the thesis chapters. I argue throughout that this study adds to both postcolonial theory in communication and writ-large by in-depth analysis of the intersectional power relations underlying American exceptionalist ideals in Peace Corps narratives, and revealing moments of rupture in the narratives.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory may not seem like the obvious choice for a white, Western, middle-class woman to use in her research, particularly in a project that employs partly ethnographic methods. Even now, the legacy of the imperialist ethnographic imagination continues (Prasad, P., 2003), but simply because ethnography has been used as a tool of cultural imperialism does not mean that is the only thing it can be used for (see Supriya, 2002; Supriya, 2004). And though it may be difficult for me to challenge Western ways of being and knowing that I cannot pretend to be wholly removed from, the task is imperative. In this age of increasing globalization,
boundaries between people, nations, and cultures are becoming progressively more permeable and even absent. Yet, the remnants of imperialism remain in Western ideologies of knowledge and capital, and have shifted the grounds of colonization from people’s bodies to their minds and finances. As a critical scholar, I recognize the value of postcolonial theory in critiquing and deconstructing a global system that continually reinscribes neocolonial representations and practices. However, as a white and Western critical scholar, I must be extremely self-reflexive in my work and critically aware of the choices that I am continually making, both in the field and in my writing, as to the way I represent both myself and others, and how I perform the role of researcher in the field. This discussion involves a number of complex factors, and I will thus engage further with the idea of self-reflexivity at a later point. First, an introduction to postcolonial theory is required.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is an interdisciplinary field of study which is “committed to theorizing the problematics of colonization and decolonization” (Shome & Hegde, 2002a, p. 250), with an explicit commitment to “a radical critique of colonialism/imperialism and neocolonialism” (Prasad, A., 2003, p. 7). Postcolonial criticism is the practice of critique using postcolonial theory, and is often shortened to “postcolonialism.” Some scholars have noted that the suffix of “-ism” in the term can lead to an unfortunate misunderstanding and equation of postcolonialism with racism, sexism, and classism (Prasad, A., 2003). It is thus important to clarify that the act of (neo)colonialism is that which postcolonialism critiques.

A large percentage of postcolonial theory is focused on the interrogation and deconstruction of Western practice and thought, in order to reveal the (neo)colonial dynamics therein. Prasad and Prasad are worth quoting at length:
Postcolonial theory seeks to understand (neo)colonialism and other related phenomena by means of investigating the role therein not only of Western political and economic practices, but also, for instance, of Western culture, knowledge, and epistemology. In so doing, postcolonial theory aims to develop a fine-grained understanding of: (a) the multiplicity of instruments and causes that combine to perpetuate the current international regime of exploitation and deprivation, as well as (b) of their wide-ranging effects on peoples, cultures, economies, epistemologies, and so forth. (2003, p. 284)

This detailed paragraph includes a wide-range of postcolonial endeavors, yet the focus is clearly on investigating Western political practices and Western knowledge production. Though a critique of Western ideological hegemony is always implied, other studies focus on the effects of these practices on the non-Western world (Supriya, 2002; Supriya, 2004, Mbembe 2001), and yet others focus on the role of the researcher in reinforcing or destabilizing hegemonic discourses and practices (Supriya, 2001; Baines, 2010; Mohanty, 1991; Norander & Harter, 2012).

Postcolonial theory is a diverse field not only in terms of a study’s central focus, but also in discipline of study and area of concern. The primary concerns of postcolonialism, beyond critiquing (neo)colonial discourses and practices, are contested. However, I argue that there are five areas that most postcolonial scholars would agree are important to the field: representations of the Other, colonization of the mind, de-centering and re-centering, liminality and hybridity, and postcolonial self-reflexivity. In the following paragraphs, I explain each of these at length. After outlining debates and tensions within the field, I conclude by positioning myself and this study within the broader postcolonial research.

**Representations of the Other.**

Edward Said’s landmark work, *Orientalism* (1978), introduced the discursive construction and representation of the monolithic ‘Oriental Other’ into the literature. This book
is often lauded as the birth of postcolonial theory, and has been widely cited in the years since its release. Said, introducing his work, states that “the Orient was almost a European invention” (p. 1), created by the West as a foil against which the West could re-present itself, both to itself and to those groups it desired to dominate and colonize. As a result, Fanon notes, “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World” (1963/2004, p. 58). The represented faults, eccentricities and abnormalities of the Middle Eastern, Asian, and African ‘Other’ allow the West to (re)draw itself in opposition as virtuous, standard, and normal.

Said’s work especially focuses on the representation of the Orient in the Western literary and visual arts, and also in academic writing. That there is an actual place and people that inspired the original discourse and stories, he argues, becomes lost in the reification of the dominant imaginary, ceasing to have any bearing on its ongoing reproduction. As Spivak informs us, “in the context of colonial production, the subalter has no history and cannot speak” (1988, pp. 287); thus, “the [Western] representation does the job, for the West, and faute de mieux, for the poor Orient” (Said, 1978, pp. 21). What Said strives to conceptualize is not the relationship of the ‘Other’ to the West, or the how the Western version of the ‘Other’ maps onto ‘reality,’ but how “[k]nowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world” (p. 40).

The act of analyzing and deconstructing Western representations of the international Other to reveal hidden ideologies continues to hold an important place in the interdisciplinary postcolonial literature, especially in the fields of literary criticism (Spivak, 1985; Spivak, 1988; Said, 1993) and international development (Andreasson, 2005; Dieter & Rajiv, 2008; Jefferess, 2002; Kapoor, 2008; Repo & Yrjölä, 2011; Richey & Ponte, 2008; Yrjölä, 2009). However, technological changes have shifted the origin of many hegemonic discourses from literature and
art to media and advertisement. Scholars in international development, for example, have recently been very intrigued by the role that celebrities play, investigating how celebrity humanitarianism serves to reinforce neocolonial hierarchies of nation (Repo & Yrjölä, 2011; Yrjölä, 2009), and how celebrity diplomacy serves to shroud the West’s implication in the political processes of ‘development’ (Dieter & Rajiv, 2008; Richey & Ponte, 2008). Others analyze the neocoloniality inherent in the discourse of highly-visible aid campaigns, such as international child support programs (Jefferess, 2002) and (RED) (Repo & Yrjölä, 2011; Richey & Ponte, 2008; Yrjölä, 2009).

Postcolonial critiques of Western representations of the Other have also been taken up in women and gender studies, and specifically leveled at Western feminism. Chandra Mohanty, in her piece “Under Western Eyes” (1991), focuses on the discursive appropriation of the voices of Third World women in Western feminist scholarship and the colonizing way that their lives and practices are represented. She claims that this colonizing scholarship reduces the heterogeneity of Third World women, “thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular ‘Third World woman’—an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse” (p. 53). In this way, her critique is quite similar to that of Orientalism (Said, 1978), except focused specifically on feminist knowledge production.

Though slightly tangential to our main discussion, it is important to note that the use of the word “colonizing” in feminist scholarship does not only refer to international post-colonial (here used as a temporal marker) relations; this term is also used to signify the relationship between white U.S. feminists and U.S. (-based, if not born) feminists of color (Mohanty, 1991; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). This use of the word “colonizing” and the appropriation of the term
“Third World women” to refer to women of color located in the United States (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) as well as those living in the global South reveals the intricate connection that postcolonial theoretical issues have to issues of race and ethnicity. Though colonialism should never be reduced to racism, the act is intricately tied to race, which this appropriation of terminology clearly reveals. The relationship between (neo)colonialism and racism is spoken of by a number of postcolonial scholars (Fanon, 1963/2004; Mbembe, 2001; Puar, 2007), and is extremely complex.¹ (Neo)Colonialism is neither the singular cause of racism nor the effect of racism, yet is inextricably linked to it in a variety of situations. In this piece, as I will describe in detail later, I will take an intersectional view of nation and race—as well as gender, class, and sexuality (Acker, 2006; Baines, 2010; McCall, 2001; West & Fenstermaker, 2002)—that sees dynamics of power as complexly interwoven and continually interacting with one another.

Colonization of the mind.

Postcolonial theorists do not only focus on the West’s colonizing acts, but also how those are received, taken up, and resisted by the subject of colonization, specifically within the subject’s own patterns of thought and worldview. In his book Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon (1952/1967) delves into the mental state of the colonized (Black) man from a psychoanalytic perspective. He recognizes that there are psychological issues, or even problems, in the mind of colonized peoples, but contrary to some of his contemporaries, he does not believe them to be inherent in the (Black) mind, rather he positions these psychological issues as the effects of colonization. The one who has been colonized is one “in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality” (Fanon, 1952/1967, p. 18, emphasis mine).

¹ Race is highly contextual, and functions in a variety of ways. The relationships that one finds between race, ethnicity, and nation will appear very differently given different geographical and historical contexts.
Though this phrasing may seem to apply only to the subject currently under colonial rule, in fact, the ontological and epistemological effects of colonialism continue within the minds of the colonized and their children long after the imperial state has ended (Ngũgĩ, 1986). As Fanon later states, “It is the colonist who fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject” (p. 2, 1963/2004, emphasis in original). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, in his book *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), argues that this is accomplished mainly through language. In schools, even now, the children in his homeland of Kenya are taught in English, a language that is not their own. Ngũgĩ sees language (or communication) and culture as mutually constitutive; therefore, the linguistic training of the children is also a cultural training – they are trained to think in one way at home, and another way at school. The English language becomes paired with progress, success, and knowledge, and the language of home with regression, failure, and ignorance. This results in “the disassociation of the sensibility of that child from his natural and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation” (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 17), as well as the elevation of Western language and culture. This is an example of ‘epistemic violence’, a term Spivak (1988) borrowed from Foucault to describe the hegemony of Western ways of knowing, which seek to silence and remove non-Western epistemologies.

**De-centering and re-centering.**

In many ways, this section regarding de-centering and re-centering is a continuation of the preceding discussion. Working with the ground set by Fanon and Ngũgĩ, postcolonial theorists have conceptualized alternative theoretical frameworks which de-center Eurocentric thought, and re-center other ways of being and knowing in its place. Asante’s idea of *Afrocentricity* (1988) directly answers Fanon and Ngũgĩ’s concern with the colonization of the mind, both in the individual and systemically. At one level, it seeks to re-center the individual in
her culture of origin, and at another it seeks a movement which will re-center African thought, literature, art, and history within an entire group of people. Ngũgĩ (1986) called for a similar move: to re-center African language and the study of African literature within African schools, rather than leaving English language and literature at the center.

Asiacentricity has also begun to be theorized, as a re-centering of Asian ontologies and epistemologies within the representation and study of Asian people, places, art, and objects (Miike, 2007; Miike, 2008; Miike, 2010). Afrocentric and Asiacentric theories have been both lauded and criticized; they have been applauded for disrupting Eurocentrism in the academy, and theorizing ontological and epistemological alternatives. However, they have also been criticized for being essentialist, ethnocentric, and based on a slippage between race, ethnicity, culture, and skin color, critiques which Miike (2010) argues reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of both Afrocentricity and Asiacentricity. He clarifies that these theories

...are simply protesting that Eurocentric perspectives are too narrow to account for the richness and complexities of human, not European, experiences, and that there are different perspectives, expressed through different particularities, based on different cultural locations. Their thesis is that hearing all voices [from] all cultural locations is humane. (p. 202).

Thus, Afrocentric and Asiacentric theories destabilize European thought as the universal center, and allow non-European people and texts to take a subject position—and speak on their own terms—rather than be placed in a position where they are the object of scrutiny through a Eurocentric lens. Thus, these as well as other theories (Ngũgĩ, 2012) are calling for a multiplicity of centers. Though Miike’s explanation addresses some of the criticism surrounding these theories, the question still remains: who decides what lens is appropriate for a given person/artifact and based on what criteria? As of yet, this has not yet been addressed.

Liminality and hybridity.
Borders are, if not central, then at least implicated in postcolonial work: their construction, deconstruction, strengthening, weakening, possibility and impossibility. The position of being on a border, or constantly crossing over a border, from one region to another and back again, is something that is explored by postcolonial theorists. The idea of occupying a liminal space—one that cannot easily be defined by borders and areas—is a key construct in some postcolonial thought. Bhabha introduces us to the modern postcolonial state of being, where “the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (1994, p. 13). The deconstruction of borders by transnational peoples, movement, and information necessarily leads to hybridity of nation, culture, and signification. Bhabha “emphasizes hybridity’s ability to subvert and reappropriate dominant discourses” (Kraidy, 2002, pp. 319-320).

Hybridity is one of the most widely used concepts in postcolonial theory, but it is also one of the most criticized (Kraidy, 2002). To a large degree, this is because hybridity can mean nearly anything one wants. As a concept, it is severely undertheorized (Kraidy, 2002), and as such is vulnerable to appropriation for hegemonic, neocolonial ends, even as it is also a means of subverting neocolonial discourses.

Liminality also leads to the construction and expression of new subject positions from which to undermine neocolonial cultural hegemony. This is seen in Third World feminist writings such as Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1999). Based on her own childhood experiences, Anzaldúa describes life on the border between Mexico and the United States. Borderlands serves to “introduce another locus of inscription and intervention, another hybrid, ‘inappropriate’ enunciative site…for the signification of postcolonial agency”
This border position is a site of postcolonial agency because it disrupts grand narratives, and equips “the postcolonial subject…to see that national and cultural identities cannot be essentialized” (Shome, 1996, p. 45).

**Postcolonial self-reflexivity.**

To some extent, all academic researchers are implicated in Western discursive hegemony. Even if one’s own research is highly attentive to voices that are traditionally othered, and alternative readings are incorporated into syllabi, “the canon remains the same and unchallenged. Our subject positions in relation to the canon remain the same and unchallenged” (Shome, 1996, p. 46). The practices of the academy may be stretched to incorporate alternate voices, but the Eurocentric underpinnings remain. In order to subvert these underpinnings, postcolonial scholars require self-reflexivity.

Postcolonial self-reflexivity is reflexive analysis of the underlying Eurocentric assumptions of both one’s field and one’s own research, in order to root out “latent ideological structures that inform our scholarship and practices” (Shome, 1996, p. 46). This is, of course, more difficult than it sounds. How does one challenge one’s own ideological bases? Shome suggests that we need to “examine our academic discourses against a larger back-drop of Western hegemony, neocolonial, and racial politics” (1996, p. 45). She continues with a list of questions that scholars often do not stop to ask, which interrogate research agendas, the construction of “marketable” research, and our positions in reproducing hegemony. As with all critical thinking, the first step in developing postcolonial self-reflexivity is learning to ask the right questions, and taking action to undermine Western hegemony based on the answers.

**Debates and tensions in postcolonial theory.**
Within this large, interdisciplinary project of postcolonial theory and criticism many debates and tensions arise. In this section, I address some of the more foundational debates, as well as where my research fits within these areas of contention. To begin, even the word ‘postcolonial’ itself is contested. The temporal marker of ‘post’ is seen by some scholars as an indication that colonialism has passed and no longer exists, and others as noting the time period following the era of physical colonial occupation (Prasad, A., 2003). To many scholars who work with postcolonial theory, the word ‘postcolonial’ simply indicates a form of critical practice, “a way of thinking about colonization and its apparatuses and consequences” (Prasad, A., 2003, p. 27). This confusion around the term postcolonial leads to some scholars feeling the need to denote that their work is both postcolonial and anti-colonial (e.g. Nkomo, 2011) and others just assuming that the postcolonial is anti-colonial without a clear delineation from its temporal use (e.g. Shome, 1996). Scholars have begun to coalesce around the notation of ‘postcolonial’ (with a hyphen) as indication of the time period coming after the end of physical colonization, and ‘postcolonial’ (one word) as the critical theoretical orientation. In this study, then, the term postcolonial refers to the critical practice that seeks to reveal and subvert Western neocolonial and imperial discourses and practices.

Once the term postcolonial has been to some degree settled, the question arises: what counts as a valid object of postcolonial scrutiny? Even those who accept the term as denoting a form of critical practice recognize that it gestures toward a time-marker of some sort: is there a temporal point of de-colonization after which postcolonial criticism may be used? Different countries were colonized, de-colonized, and re-colonized at various points in history—where does the postcolonial begin? In addition, who counts as postcolonial? The United States was once a colony of Great Britain—is it a postcolonial country? Are colonizers themselves also
postcolonial? Anshuman Prasad addresses these questions by claiming that most postcolonial scholars recognize that the entire world is open to postcolonial scrutiny, and that everything is postcolonial in some sense, as long as we recognize that “different countries and societies are not postcolonial in the same way” (2003, p. 28, emphasis in original). Indeed, in this study, I follow his lead to use postcolonial as “a descriptive and not an evaluative term” (Hulme as quoted by Prasad, 2003, p. 28).

Postcolonial criticism, though it is meant to undermine Western hegemony, does so to a large extent through critique of Western discourses and representations of international Others. This brings up two significant tensions: first, the tension around critiquing hegemonic representations of the Other without implying that there is a ‘true’ representation and thus setting up a different monolithic depiction (Nkomo, 2011; Shome, 1996); and second, the seeming contradiction between focusing on Western discourses and attempting to de-center Western knowledge (Jack, Westwood, Srinivas, & Sardar, 2011). Shome describes this first tension as the problem of “having to challenge the misrepresentations of racial ‘others’ in Western discourses, while at the same time avoiding the suggestion that there is an authentic racial identity that the critic knows is being misrepresented” (1996, pp. 46-47, emphasis in original). Her answer is to turn to Spivak’s conceptualization of strategic essentialism (1988). This act of knowingly essentializing an Other as a political strategy is, according to Spivak, necessary to some extent in any act of postcolonial criticism. Therefore, it is imperative for the critic to engage in self-reflexivity in order to avoid reproducing the same colonizing moves of the discourse she is critiquing. Shome emphasizes how imperative it is that “the critic always remains aware that she or he is essentializing in order to realize certain political goals” (1996, p. 47, emphasis in original).
Other scholars have noted that the focus on Western discourses seems in some ways to re-center rather than destabilize Western knowledge production (Jack et al., 2011). However, others see this as turning the ‘imperial gaze’ onto the West from the margins, and reversing the hegemonic subject-object relationship between the West and the global South (Delgado, 1998). I see this tension as another point where postcolonial self-reflexivity is vital. The critic must recognize that in analyzing a Western discourse (which, I must qualify, is not what all postcolonial scholarship entails; however, it is the type of postcolonial scholarship which falls prey to this issue) the possibility of re-centering Western epistemology always exists. Yet, by being reflexive about how one represents the discourse, how one deconstructs the discourse, and what audience one is writing for, the scholar may avoid reinscribing hegemonic knowledge production.

The final debate in postcolonial theory that I describe involves a question mentioned above: what audience is the scholar writing for? Prasad and Prasad, quoting Young, recognize that “partly as a result of postcolonialism’s deep intellectual engagement with complex issues of epistemology, discourse and the like, the language of postcolonial theory is often said to be somewhat ‘opaque and dense’” (2003, p. 291), causing “a further narrowing of postcolonial theory’s potential audience” (Prasad & Prasad, 2003a, p. 292). In some way, then, the dense, theory-laden writings of postcolonialism reinforce the hegemony of Western knowledge by assuming a basis of Western thought, style, literature, and language in the audience. The writings of postcolonial theory are criticized for not being meant to be read by the peoples and knowledges they are meant to attend to. The “Holy Trinity” (Jack et al., 2011) of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak have especially been criticized. In fact, “for Marxist scholars, the use of High Theory, especially in its poststructuralist incarnations, and the emphasis on writing and culture,
is an aestheticizing distraction from the anticolonial goal of social change” (Jack et al., 2011, p. 278). Yet, at the same time, postcolonialism tries to go beyond the ‘common sense’ knowledge systems that are based on Eurocentric thought, and thus requires new terminology and ways of engaging with theory. Does engagement with complex theory require dense language? Or is this yet another aspect of Western hegemony: removing authority from indigenous voices who are ‘not theoretical enough’? As of yet, I do not know how to enter this debate, or where I stand.

**Where I fit in: a postcolonial study of Peace Corps.**

Situated within this interdisciplinary field of postcolonial literature, a communication study of the relationship between the Peace Corps volunteer and the so-called ‘Host Country National’ draws from—and has the potential to add to—postcolonial theory in a variety of ways. First, a communicative study itself is a valuable resource, as there is a dearth of postcolonial communication scholarship. Communication studies can add a valuable dimension that is currently missing from postcolonial theory and criticism. Though literature, art, media, and academic writings—all communicative acts—have been criticized from other perspectives, the addition of communicative lens may add new insights. This study incorporates Peace Corps literature; however, it also analyzes Peace Corps discourses in the daily act of recruitment, and volunteer narratives related in person to the researcher. These types of everyday discursive representations are currently underrepresented in postcolonial theory, and only a few postcolonial ethnographies of communication exist (Supriya, 2002; Supriya, 2004).

In part, this may stem from the West’s historical use of ethnography to depict the Other as primitive (Prasad, P., 2003), and the continued neocolonial influence of the ethnographic imagination (Prasad, P., 2003). However, most ethnographic methods that are so heavily critiqued are those used in situations where a Western, perhaps white, researcher goes to live
with more ‘primitive’ people of the global South, and writes about their culture from a Western perspective. On the contrary, this project uses ethnographic methods to analyze the construction of Western narrative regarding itself, and how those constructions affect relationships with other peoples. By turning the gaze back on the West (though being careful in so doing not simply to re-center the West), ethnographic and other qualitative research methods can be appropriated for postcolonial use.

This critique of representation is slightly different from those who deconstruct Western representations of the Other; here, I wish to deconstruct the representation of the American Peace Corps volunteer, and analyze how the West’s discourses about itself serve to implicitly (re)construct an expectation regarding its relationship to the Other, and thus the Other him/herself. “[W]e must begin to see from the margins in and not just from the center out” (Delgado, 1998, p. 434). By turning the gaze of the imperial West back in on itself, the center can be appropriated for use of the margins’ project, and not the other way around. This study of Peace Corps recruitment and volunteer narratives adds a new link in postcolonial theory between the West’s Orientalist representations and their neocolonial actions by critically analyzing the discursive representation of itself as well.

Furthermore, this study moves one step beyond the deconstruction of hegemonic representations by investigating how narrative constructions of the Other constitute or affect lived experiences with the Other. This study looks for connections between Peace Corps recruitment narratives and the lived experience related by returned volunteers. Hegemonic narratives are (re)established not only by literature and media, but also through everyday talk.

As an extension of work done in areas of international aid and development, I explore the decolonial and neocolonial potentiality of international aid and development. What might a de-
colonizing international volunteer organization look like? Are there traits of the Peace Corps that might be appropriated for a de-colonizing purpose?

Finally, this study will certainly supplement work on postcolonial self-reflexivity. As previously mentioned, I am a white, Western woman and was a Peace Corps volunteer in Tanzania from 2007 to 2009. In this study, all of these traits make me susceptible to reinscribing hegemony in my own discursive representation of Others, as well as the interview questions that I asked, the way I interacted with other returned volunteers, and the way that I chose to analyze the texts that I have collected.

**Postcolonial Theory in Communication**

In the communication discipline writ-large, there have been multiple calls for the further incorporation of postcolonial theory (Hegde, 1998; Shome, 2003, 2006; Shome & Hedge, 2002a, 2002b). Though other fields in both the humanities and social sciences have been quite quick to realize the growing potential and importance of postcolonial theory and criticism, in the communication discipline postcolonial studies are, as of yet, quite few. Three subfields have paid more attention than most: intercultural communication, organizational communication, and rhetoric. Postcolonialism is growing out of the already strong critical traditions in each of these subfields. Situated as a critical-cultural study, this project will help to bring critical researchers of different subfields into productive collaboration in order to “facilitate and expedite accomplishing their mutual goal of effecting change related to persistent, pressing social issues around the world” (Allen, 2010, p. 586). Partnerships have been called for, and this study builds ground for such alliances around a struggle against colonialism. In order to lay out the foundation for these alliances, I first describe the state of postcolonial theory in each of the three
subdisciplines. Following this, I explain how this project bridges these three literatures in communication, and what this study addresses.

**Critical intercultural communication.**

The subfield of critical intercultural communication is interested in examining dynamics of power between cultural groups as constructed in communicative acts. Note that this is somewhat distinguished from the field of intercultural communication in its entirety by the addition of the moniker ‘critical’. This is important as the field has only lately taken a critical turn (Moon, 2010; Ono, 2010). The recent advent of the *Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication* (Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) solidifies that turn and posits directions for future theorizing and work in which postcolonial theory holds an important role, since “it insists on the importance of recognizing the connections between cultural power and larger geopolitical relations and international histories as they come to inform unequal power relations between different cultural groups and identities, and their practices and imaginations.” (Shome, 2010, p. 150).

Postcolonial theory and criticism has been accepted into critical intercultural communication slightly faster than other communication subfields, partly because of the subfield’s clear focus on relations between ‘cultures’ and ‘nations.’ Scholars in this discipline have already begun to make new strides in postcolonial theorizing, such as Kraidy’s (2002) extension of the concept of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), and Miike’s (2007; 2008; 2010) formulation of Asiacentric theory as a complement to Afrocentric theory (Asante, 1988; 1998). As we have already spent time on Miike and Asiacentricity, I will briefly discuss Kraidy’s additions to hybridity. Kraidy proposes “an intercontextual theory of hybridity that explicates transnational cultural dynamics by articulating hybridity and hegemony in a global context” (p.
333), which “[i]n order to have a critical edge…should be understood as a communicative practice” (p. 334). His extension of hybridity thus is necessarily communicative and inclusive of hegemonic forces; he advocates for an understanding of hybridity as always having possibilities for both resistive and hegemonic use. The task of the critic is therefore to unmask the hegemonic forces in the hybrid phenomena and reveal ways they may be destabilized.

Postcolonial theory in intercultural communication is also heavily linked to race, whether that be in a call for the transnational theorization of race (Shome, 2010) or for the destabilization of whiteness transnationally and intra-nationally (Moon, 2010; Steyn, 2010). A postcolonial focus is called for in intercultural communication in order to “de-center whiteness and include postcolonial notions of culture and identity and a deeper reflexivity on the part of white scholars as they study the ‘Other.’” (Moon, 2010, p. 42). Indeed, it has already begun to be used to achieve such goals – scholars in intercultural communication have used postcolonialism to complicate ideas of ‘nation’ and ‘culture’ (Moon, 2010; Ono, 2010; Sorrells, 2010), as well as engage with self-reflexivity (Gajjala, 2002; Supriya, 2001, 2002, 2004).

Scholars in critical intercultural communication have also taken more traditional lines of postcolonial thought and extended them into the communication field. For instance, postcolonial theory has been used to question the Western-centrism of the field (Miike, 2007, 2008, 2010; Sorrells, 2010) and of ‘commonly held’ gender roles (Lengel & Martin, 2010). In addition, researchers have also investigated representations of the Other (Bell, 2011; Parameswaran, 2002, 2004). It is notable that representations of the Other in discourses of international aid or volunteer organizations have only been subjected to scrutiny by one author (Bell, 2011). In this field, organizations such as the Peace Corps have thus far evaded notice.
Critical intercultural communication is known as a subfield “that connects with and joins other situated fields in Communication” (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010, p. 1), and thus its work cannot be said to belong to intercultural communication alone: it bridges between rhetoric (Hasian, 2010; Kraidy, 2002; Moon, 2010; Ono, 2010; Shome, 1996, 2010; Steyn, 2010), organizational communication (Allen, 2010; Norander & Harter, 2012), critical-cultural studies (Bell 2011; Gajjala, 2002; Kraidy, 2002; Murphy & Kraidy, 2003; Parameswaran, 2002, 2004; Shome, 2010; Steyn, 2010), and many more. “A central goal in critical approaches to intercultural communication includes challenging systems of domination, critiquing hierarchies of power and confronting discrimination to create a more equitable world” (Sorrells, 2010, p. 182), a goal which is shared by critical scholars in organizational communication and rhetoric as well. Thus, this study is situated in critical-cultural communication, yet draws from postcolonial work in critical intercultural communication, organizational communication, and rhetoric, bridging the three subfields. Such bridges are explicitly called for; Allen (2010), for instance, makes an explicit call for work that bridges critical intercultural communication and organizational communication, whose literature will be discussed next.

Organizational Communication.

In the subfield of organizational communication, postcolonial theory and criticism have only been employed and explored slightly as of yet. In fact, most work regarding postcolonial theory has actually been produced in the larger field of organization studies, which, though affiliated with organizational communication, is not communication per se. There have been relatively few works of organizational communication in comparison. Organization studies, however, focused a recent special issue of Organization on postcolonial theory. In the introduction, Jack et al. admit that “the diverse and rich resources of postcolonial studies in the
humanities and wider social sciences have been only very selectively mined for productive
dialogue with management and organization studies” (2011, p. 275) as of yet. Some work,
however, has been done. Bringing postcolonial theory into the realm of organizational analysis,
Anshuman Prasad (2003) claims that “in order to appreciate the significance of postcolonialism
for organization studies, we need to understand some of the ways in which postcolonial theory
might defamiliarize organizational phenomena” (p. 30). Many organizational scholars have
begun with an organizational phenomenon with which they are intimately familiar: their own
work (Baines, 2010, Humphries & McNicholas, 2009) and that of their field (Broadfoot &
Munshi, 2007; Khan & Koshul, 2011; Nkomo, 2011). These authors have turned the
postcolonial lens back on themselves, emphasizing the importance of postcolonial self-
reflexivity. Other scholars have discussed the implications of postcolonial theory on
understandings of globalization and the translocal (Banerjee, 2011; Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney,
2005; Gopal, Willis, & Gopal, 2003; McKenna, 2011; Misoczky, 2011).

Recently, in a fascinating move away from pieces regarding only postcolonial criticism,
organizational communication scholars Broadfoot, Munshi, & Nelson-Marsh (2010) and
Norander & Harter (2012) use postcolonial theory not only to critique, but also to create new
options for engaging professionally and pedagogically in decolonizing ways. Broadfoot,
Munshi, and Nelson-Marsh (2010) used postcolonial theory and Web 2.0 social networking tools
to create a rhizomatic, postcolonial, online conference devoted to enabling a higher degree of
access for scholars in the Global South as well as those who do not have the funds or privilege
necessary to travel to a conference, and wrote about their reflections and the implications of this
project on future conferencing. Norander & Harter, instead of criticizing a traditional Western
organization for neocolonial behavior, choose to examine a transnational feminist organization
that is an exemplar of women from the West working in an equitable relationship with women from the South, and to theorize how this may be done in other organizations.

It is notable that organizational communication scholars have not to my knowledge conducted significant research on the Peace Corps. While aid and service work as found in the non-governmental or civil society sector has been the object of attention (Dempsey, 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Lewis, 2005), the unique positioning of the Peace Corps as both a volunteer organization, and part of the federal government, has escaped notice. From a postcolonial perspective, then, the Peace Corps is especially intriguing. Peace Corps is a highly visible organization, and a well-established provider of international development, whose related discourse is well suited for analysis from a postcolonial-critical perspective.

**Rhetoric.**

In 1996, Raka Shome wrote a piece calling for the revisioning of rhetorical studies based on postcolonial theory and criticism. However, in the last 16 years since this call was made, few rhetorical studies have been done. Recently, scholars in these subfields have extended postcolonial theorizing in the field (Kraidy, 2002; Murphy & Kraidy, 2003), or made calls for postcolonial studies (Shome, 2010), but few rhetorical studies using postcolonial theory and criticism have been performed. Some authors have used postcolonial criticism to perform historical studies of rhetoric, using a postcolonial lens to analyze imperialist and resistant rhetoric from the eighteenth century (Black, 2007; Hasian, Jr.; 2002, Hasian 2010) to a few decades ago (Butler, 2002), but even the more recent work is considered as regarding “America’s imperial past” (Butler, 2002, p. 4). Very little rhetorical postcolonial critique has been done of contemporary colonizing (Balaji, 2011; Parameswaran, 2002, 2004; Steyn, 2010) and of resistant (Delgado, 1998) discourses. Postcolonial self-reflexivity has been employed, however, (Cypher,
2001; Jarratt, 2004; Supriya, 2001) in insightful examination of the discipline’s relationship with postcolonial theory.

Until very recently, no move like that of Broadfoot, Munshi, and Nelson-Marsh (2010) or Norander and Harter (2012) had been made in rhetoric – using postcolonial theory to reconceptualize contemporary neocolonial power dynamics in a more equitable manner. That is, until Chawla and Rodriguez’s (2011) study appeared, which criticizes the introductory public speaking course and revises it as an introduction to the complex breadth of the communication discipline as a whole, using postcolonial insights. Chawla and Rodriguez argue that a course focusing on ‘advocacy’ rather than public speaking still allows for instruction in oration, while also not relegating nonverbal communicative advocacy. However, in rhetoric writ-large, the few cases I have cited are by far the minority; arguably, postcolonial theory has been sadly neglected in this subfield. Even Chawla and Rodriguez, whose article was published less than a year ago, bemoan the continued absence of postcolonial scholarship in rhetoric, or even attention given by rhetoricians to postcolonial theory.

**Where I fit in: A critical-cultural study of Peace Corps.**

Critical-cultural studies overlaps heavily with each of these three subfields. As these three areas—critical intercultural communication, organizational communication, and rhetoric—are the subfields encompassing most of the disciplinary work that has already been done regarding or using postcolonial theory, it makes perfect sense to draw from these three for the purposes of this study. Thus, this study allows me to draw connections between the bounded voice of the organization—carefully chosen pictures, text, narrative, and style in order to represent Peace Corps in a certain way in public discourse—and the unsurveilled everyday
enactment of recruitment and unrehearsed remembrance of experience found through participant observation and interviews.

There is a heavy focus in postcolonial theory, as it is significantly grounded in literary criticism, to focus on historical representations of the Other, and even the places where it is often picked up in rhetoric follow that trend. This study allows me to not only analyze a contemporary place where the Other is being represented in the Peace Corps’ own documents about its mission—something that is not often addressed in postcolonial studies—but also to see how the discursive construction of the Other relates to lived experience with the Other—how communication constitutes postcolonial power relations in situ—through participant observation with organizational members.

The Peace Corps itself has not been a direct object of study, as far as I can tell, in any of these areas. Thus, its unique qualities, mission, structure, and strategies have not yet been explored. In addition, I have not encountered research that addresses the particular foci of this study: how American international volunteers’ narratives of self and other serve to construct their expectations of life ‘in the field’, and how those expectations relate to narratives of actual experiences. In fact, of everything mentioned above, only a few pieces (Baines, 2010; Norander & Harter, 2012; Supriya, 2002, 2004) use qualitative research methods together with postcolonial theory. Most postcolonial work is theorizing or criticism of texts; using postcolonial theory in qualitative research is a relatively new development in the interdisciplinary postcolonial theoretical field (Parameswaran, 2008). Therefore, by using textual criticism to situate my study in the current postcolonial literature, but also relying heavily on qualitative methods, which have only begun to be used in postcolonial studies, this study bridges new and helpful ground in the postcolonial studies writ-large. Additionally, this study
adds attention and new insights to the performance of postcolonial self-reflexivity in data collection, data analysis, and academic writing.

My research questions for this thesis project are:

1. How do Peace Corps recruitment events and texts construct the relationship between volunteers and so-called ‘Host Country Nationals’?
   - How do recruitment events and texts narrate the Peace Corps mission, as well as what it means to be (a) a volunteer, (b) an American, and (c) a ‘Host Country National’?
   - What expectations do volunteers form in light of their recruiting encounters?

2. How do returned Peace Corps volunteers construct their relationship with ‘Host Country Nationals’?
   - How do they narrate the Peace Corps missions, as well as what it means to be (a) a volunteer, (b) an American, and (c) a ‘Host Country National’?
   - How do their constructions upon return relate to recruitment constructions and expectations?

3. How does this communication facilitate relations of power, particularly concerning nation, race, gender, and sexuality?

Methodology

Methodological Groundings

In answering the three research questions posited above, I used ethnographic methods of data collection, and collected documents and texts. The act of choosing data to collect is an important decision, and one that should be grounded in—though not determined by—theoretical concerns. For this study, I chose to use Peace Corps recruitment pamphlets, a book of stories told by returned volunteers of their Peace Corps experience, participant observation in recruitment and returned volunteer events, and interviews with prospective and returned volunteers. In the process of deciding what data to collect, I based decisions on my research questions, collecting data in three different areas regarding both volunteer recruitment and returned volunteers. The choice to base my research around Peace Corps was made in relation to my theoretical grounding in postcolonial theory. As one of the most well-known Western
volunteer organizations in the world, whose American participants live for two years in ‘developing’ countries, with the explicit goals of both rendering services and developing greater understanding of others, the Peace Corps is a unique service organization. Rather than providing finances, it provides American bodies to other countries.

In analyzing the data, this project is first concerned with intrinsic (Kohrs Campbell & Burkholder, 1997) or emic (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) analysis. In the intrinsic phase of analysis, the text speaks for itself, and the researcher attempts to understand it on its own grounds by looking for emergent themes. I decided to approach the project in the manner detailed by Kohrs Campbell and Burkholder in their text on methods of rhetorical criticism in order to allow the documents, interview transcripts, and fieldnotes room to reveal things first for themselves. If I were to engage the texts immediately with postcolonial theory, it serves to reason that I might find only what others have already written about. However, by starting with intrinsic analysis of the texts somewhat separately from theoretical concerns, I opened space for innovative possibilities that this study may contribute to not only communication studies, but postcolonial theory writ-large. Once I thoroughly recorded themes revealed in the text itself, I continued on to analysis of historical and contextual factors that relate to the texts, as well as theoretical concerns.

The postcolonial theoretical position that I take in regard to methods also leads to an emphasis on intersectionality and self-reflexivity. Intersectionality emphasizes the impossibility of extricating one individual facet of power from others; that is, neocolonialism cannot be analyzed thoroughly without concurrently examining gender, race/ethnicity, and class. A number of different scholars have theorized intersectional approaches (Acker, 2006; McCall, 2001; West & Fenstermaker, 2002), but few have utilized them in concert with ethnographic
methods (Baines, 2010). On the other hand, scholars who analyze texts and media often examine intricate interplays of gender, race, and nation (Balaji, 2011; Bell, 2011; Parameswaran, 2002, 2004; Repo & Yrjölä, 2011; Yrjölä, 2009). This seems to indicate that it is more difficult to keep a focus on these continually interweaving power dynamics in the moment of participant observation or interview conduction than it is in spending time with a document.

However, in this project the collaboration of textual and ethnographic methods led to an ability to see and note intersectional dynamics that I otherwise might not have. Postcolonialism is concerned with deconstructing and undermining unidimensional, Orientalist representations of the Other (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1985, 1988) and exploring the complexities of postcolonial subjectivities (Anzaldúa, 1999; Bhabha, 1994). The process of revealing Eurocentric thought underlying constructions of the Other requires an interrogation of of all aspects of the representation, including gender, race, and nation. Problematic representations are problematic not simply because they declare what nation someone is from, but because they declare what a person from that nation should be like—the Orientalist assigns the Other deviant sexualities and gender roles according to their nation and race (Said, 1978). In deconstructing such representations, an intersectional sensitivity is required to ascertain all the assumptions that underlie them. In fact, not only representations of the Other, but any representation is replete with intersectional power dynamics. Thus, an intersectional perspective is necessary to well-done postcolonial research.

However, as I have mentioned, crafting a sensitivity to intersectional dynamics is not as easy as it sounds. For this reason, and many others, postcolonial self-reflexivity is also a methodological focus of this project. The postcolonial ethnographer Supriya (2001) claims that “[a]s a field-based practice, self-reflexivity occurs when ethnographers become methodologically
self-conscious regarding the relationship between what they do in the field and what they come to know about themselves and the others they encounter in their research” (p. 226).

This project has been a constant process of reflection on my methodological and analytical choices as a researcher, as well as the way that I performed the roles of participant observer, interviewer, and writer. Having been a Peace Corps volunteer myself, I have certain conceptualizations and ideas of what Peace Corps service ‘is’ from the position that I experienced it. As I interacted with participants and texts, I was self-reflexive on the assumptions that I made based on my own experience and positionality.

Methods

For this project, I engaged in participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. All of these methods produce texts--fieldnotes, transcripts, and documents—that I have analyzed from a critical-cultural perspective. In the following sections, I detail the way in which each of these three methods were performed and highlight the way in which they address my research questions.

Participant observation.

Western University\(^2\) ranks highly among U.S. colleges and universities for rate of Peace Corps recruitment this year, having a large number of graduates serving currently as volunteers, and it has a strong historical record of recruitment over the past fifty years as well. Having volunteered to participate in Peace Corps recruitment events on campus at Western University (WU) last year, I was acquainted with the campus recruiter and had a friendly relationship with her before requesting to conduct research on recruitment activities. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Tanzania from 2007-2009; the shared Peace Corps experience creates an almost

\(^2\) psuedonym
instant bond with other returned Peace Corps volunteers. I had also stopped by her office to speak with her on a few occasions; as such, she was familiar with my experience and studies. When I told her about the goals of this research project, she introduced me to her assistant recruiter at WU, who had been hired at the beginning of the school year. The two of them run all of the Peace Corps recruitment events and informational meetings at WU. The assistant recruiter was also immediately interested in my thesis project, and offered to help in any way he could.

Negotiating access required almost no overt or explicit labor. There seems to be a shared sense, by many returned volunteers, that the Peace Corps experience is very different from what one expects it to be going in. Both of the recruiters were curious to see what an analysis of Peace Corps discourse revealed, and requested to read the finished research. They were excited to have me accompany them to recruitment events and on classroom visits.

Participant observation addresses my research questions well. Since I am concerned with how the narratives of Peace Corps recruitment are constructed, I wanted to observe the manner in which those narratives were negotiated in situated interactions. Further, recruitment processes always include at least two returned Peace Corps volunteers. This allowed me to see what kinds of experiences were thought to be entertaining, fascinating, or relatable to prospective volunteers, as well as note the how these experiences are narrated. These events gave insight into the kind of narratives that are thought to make up the general “Peace Corps experience.” However, it also included the way that I discursively constructed expectations, and the stories from my experience that I chose to relate as well. As a returned Peace Corps volunteer myself, I was truly a participant observer.

When watching classroom presentations, my view was often solicited in addition to that of the recruiter. For example, the recruiter often described his home in one Sub-Saharan African
country, and then turned to me and asked what my home was like in another, hoping to give the students an understanding of the different conditions that a Peace Corps volunteer may find herself in from region to region. When interacting with other returned Peace Corps volunteers, they often spoke of how they struggled to make deep friendships with the people of the community in which they lived, because people just didn’t talk about deep things the same way they do here. Then, they asked me, semi-rhetorically, “You know?” And I could not deny that I recognized a feeling of agreement—I understood. Each time I spoke, each time I assumed myself to be on the same page as another returned volunteer—these were problematic moments in the observation process that I recorded and reflected upon.

As a participant observer, there were three different scenes that I was involved in: information sessions, question-and-answer interactions, and casual conversations. The most common scene for the recruitment process is that of information session. Here a prospective volunteer listens to a returned volunteer presenting information about her own experience and the Peace Corps as an organization. Following such a presentation, there is usually time set aside for questions and answers. Question-and-answer interactions create a different dynamic of interaction, where the focus is directed to a greater degree by the prospective volunteer(s). A third scene is casual conversation. Casual conversation may occur between prospective volunteers before the beginning of a session, between the recruiter and myself following an information session, or between fellow RPCVs and myself.

All three of these scenes brought forth different conversational dynamics, and focused in a slightly different way. The information session focused on the recruiter or returned volunteer, and how she narrated her experience: the way her story was constructed, what she emphasized about the Peace Corps, and what was silenced. The question-and-answer session focused on the
interplay between the recruiter and prospective volunteers; a direction was implemented in the question asked by the prospective volunteer, but the recruiter framed his answer carefully—there was an interesting interaction between the discursive construction of the question and narration of the answer. Question-and-answer sessions involved one or two returned volunteers and a large group of prospective volunteers, usually between five and thirty. Thus, the way an answer was communicated could spark a new question in another participant. The interactional dynamic in casual conversation was very different; it was usually a one-on-one conversation.

Formal Peace Corps information sessions occurred once a month on the WU campus. They were held for two hours on a weeknight in the Student Center. I attended two of these formal information sessions over the 2011-2012 school year. As a participant observer in these sessions, I was often called on to speak about my own thoughts and experiences with Peace Corps. This was a tremendous opportunity, but also a burden. As a participant, the act of taking written notes was off-putting to the other participants, and seemed out of place. Thus, I paradoxically had a fuller experience as an engaged participant, but was unable to capture that fuller experience in the moment of occurrence. I also had my own experience and depth of emotion and thought to reflect over, but little time to do that in the moment in which I was speaking. It was easier during the portion of the meeting that was more “information” than “question-and-answer.” When the focus was almost entirely on one recruiter, it was easy for me to fade into those listening, and take more in-depth notes. However, when it came to answering questions, the dilemma returned. Negotiating the tension between note taking and being present, what to write down and what to note mentally, and how to do this in the manner best suited to my research questions was daunting. Though I do not engage with methodological reflections in
this piece, these dynamics are something that I would like to engage with at a future time, in a future work.

Once a semester, the information session was replaced by a special celebration. These special sessions brought in as many as 20 returned volunteers to mingle with the prospective volunteers and talk about their experience. I attended both celebrations, and there were approximately 200 people in attendance at each of the two events. Given the number of people, there was no explicit question-and-answer time at this session, and the information came from a panel of four returned volunteers rather than one single recruiter. Like a regular information session the events were about two hours long. However, a group of returned volunteers and prospective volunteers at each event stayed after to talk for an extra hour.

Classroom presentations and announcements were quite frequent, especially leading up to the two events described above, and lasted anywhere from 10 minutes to one hour. If the class was geared towards international affairs, the instructor was likely to ask the recruiter to do a longer presentation, and perhaps to tie it into the material that the class was studying. In many other classes, the recruiter was asked to simply give a quick overview of what the Peace Corps is and does.

Thus, as a participant observer I attended formal Peace Corps information sessions, special recruitment events, and classroom announcements. In total, I collected 20 hours of participant observation and 57 pages of single-spaced fieldnotes. This is an example of typical case sampling used in qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I selected to attend the events that are most typical of the processes that I wanted to study. Most of the time, I took head notes and scratch notes at the event itself, and recorded them as fieldnotes after the experience. Before moving on to interviews, I would like to add that the study of recruitment processes does
not serve to answer only my first research question, but my second and third as well. Though recruitment processes do help construct narratives regarding Peace Corps for prospective volunteers, they also reveal the ways in which returned volunteers choose to encapsulate their experiences for that particular audience. There are interesting dynamics between how returned volunteers tend to package their experience for recruitment events, as opposed to in interviews with another returned volunteer (the researcher) or in a public book of Peace Corps narratives.

**Interviews.**

In this project, I conducted interviews with both prospective volunteers and returned volunteers. For the prospective volunteers, I found interview subjects through the participant observation. In the sessions that I attended, the recruiter included my email in the closing announcement and wrote it on the board, explaining that I was doing research on the Peace Corps, and would be happy to answer any questions interested students had about my experience if they would allow me to ask them a few questions in turn.

In a way, these interviews may be conceptualized as *ethnographic interviews* (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 176-177). They were organic and emergent from the scene. Though they did not occur in that very moment in time, they were still an “*informal, conversational interview*” (p. 176, emphasis in original), as the prospective volunteers were able to ask me just as many questions as I asked them. It was thus still part of the casual conversation scene of recruitment. The questions that the prospective volunteers chose to ask were important to my research; their questions revealed the aspects of Peace Corps service that they were most interested in and focused on, and what they conceptualized the Peace Corps to be about. Additionally, the way that I *answered* their questions is just as important. I am a returned volunteer as well as a researcher, I must reflect on my own complicity in reinforcing or destabilizing hegemonic
discourses through my responses to the questions of prospective volunteers. I engaged in 5 interviews with prospective volunteers, collecting 4.5 hours of audio recordings.

In order to solicit interviews with returned Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs), I sent out an email to the RPCV mailing list, of which I am a member. There are 87 RPCVs on the list; I received responses from 11 people. I interviewed all 11 subjects, and collected 14.5 hours of audio recorded data.

All of these interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The resultant texts were analyzed in relation to fieldnotes and other ethnographic data collected. Between the two types of interviews, I collected 19 hours of data and over 250 pages of single-spaced transcripts. These interviews are extremely valuable in answering all three of my research questions. I asked participants about their views of the Peace Corps’ mission, what it means to be a volunteer, what it means to be American, and how they consider Host Country Nationals. In addition, I asked about how each would/did feel being a Peace Corps volunteer of his race, gender, and sexuality.

**Documents.**

The Peace Corps develops and utilizes a host of recruitment booklets and pamphlets, flyers, posters, and paraphernalia, in addition to the official website, the official volunteer blog site, media coverage, and unofficial references to the Peace Corps and Peace Corps volunteers on other websites. This is obviously an overwhelming amount of data to analyze, and thus I chose carefully what I examined according to my research questions. In this manner, I chose nine Peace Corps recruitment pamphlets, and a book of 28 stories told by returned volunteers, compiled and published by Peace Corps.
The recruitment pamphlets are prominently displayed in the Peace Corps office at WU, directly to the right of the visitor seating. They catch the eye with color and pictures, and their small size helps make them desirable for quick and easy information access. Seeing as this specific university is currently ranked among the top schools for the number of graduates serving as Peace Corps volunteers, and among the top ranking of all time, the potential influence of these materials at this university alone is quite remarkable.

There are nine different 8-panel pamphlets available, each folded from a single piece of paper. The assumed intention of these brochures is to entice prospective volunteers to apply for Peace Corps service. What made the pamphlets especially enticing is that four of them are geared towards certain ethnic groups. They are entitled, respectively: “An exceptional opportunity for African Americans,” “An exceptional opportunity for Asian Americans,” “An exceptional opportunity for Latinos,” and “An exceptional opportunity for American Indians and Alaskan Natives.”

The second document, *A Life Inspired: Tales of Peace Corps Service* (Peace Corps, 2008c), is a book that is published and distributed by the Peace Corps. Though the book is available for purchase in the U.S. government’s online bookstore, the book is meant to be distributed through Peace Corps recruiters to prospective volunteers. In fact, I acquired the book at a recruitment event on WU’s campus, and I noted that hundreds of copies were handed out throughout the year’s events. The book is 141 pages long, including a foreword and 28 stories, each from a different returned volunteer. The volunteers who contributed represent different genders and races, a broad range of ages, and service in a variety of world regions. Their dates of return to the U.S. range from the early 1960s, to those who returned earlier in the year the
book was published. Each story is 4-7 pages long, and they are grouped into categories: “Making a Difference,” “Cultural Understanding,” and “Window to the World.”

Both the pamphlets and the book serve the dual purpose of attempting to recruit future Peace Corps volunteers, and relate what Peace Corps experience is like. The pamphlets relate the information thought necessary to entice new volunteers, while the stories relate experiences thought to entice new volunteers. These stories, by constructing narratives of what it means to be an American volunteer overseas in the Peace Corps, address all three of my research questions.

Postcolonial Reflexivity in Method

Performing ethnographic self-reflexivity is a cyclical process of reflecting on the actual dynamics of communication in the field through a textual performance that evokes those dynamics, and this textual evocation, in turn, engenders imagination of prospective field-based enactments as the ethnographer returns to the same or other sites for further investigations that lead to still more textual evocations. (Supriya, 2001, p. 232)

The implication of my own statements and viewpoints in this analysis is both a unique opportunity and a challenge. As a returned Peace Corps volunteer, whose thoughts were often requested in the very situations—and are part of the very discourses—that I analyzed, I experienced the challenge of noting what I said and how, as well as what those around me said and how. This also afforded the opportunity of being reflexive upon what I was thinking while I was saying certain things, and how I “properly” tailored certain discourses to the situation at hand. This made the analysis both more interesting and more difficult.

For instance, in the following excerpt from one of my fieldnotes, a recruiter and I were asked to describe how time is conceptualized differently in the countries that we lived in, respectively. Carl described how public transportation in one Sub-Saharan African country doesn’t have scheduled departure times:
Carl then talks about vehicles and how they’ll tell you that they’re leaving right now, but they won’t leave for another hour or so. I break in and explain that this is because they want to get as many people on board as possible, and so they won’t leave until they’re full, but to convince you that their bus will be the first one leaving, they’ll tell you it’s leaving right away. There’s no schedule—buses just go whenever they’re full. I then tell the class about my favorite time-thing—whenever I’m on a bus, and I ask how far we have to go, they’ll tell me, “Tumeishafika! We have already arrived, no worries, we have already arrived!” and I’m like, “Uh….we’re still driving.”

I told this story in such a way as to try to solicit laughter from the audience. When I realized this, I felt very uncomfortable about it. Why was I trying to solicit laughter? What does that do? How does telling this story in that way represent Tanzanians? I felt very uncomfortable with what I had done, but it was too late.

Spending 12 hours in one day riding on a bus can lead to exhaustion and frustration when one is told that one has “already arrived.” Especially in cases where I had never traveled to a particular city before, I was anxious to have some idea of where we were, and how far away it was. In other times, I could laugh at the assertion that we were already at our destination, being familiar with the area and knowing it would be another hour at least. Not only was the variation of my own reaction to this phrase lost, but also the understanding that even these varied reactions started from a cultural assumption that time is important, an assumption that Tanzanians do not hold in the same way that the West does. In addition, I had certainly picked up the phrase myself, when walking through nearby villages with friends. “Oh, don’t worry—we’ve already arrived at the market.” However, when given the opportunity to tell a story about different conceptualizations of time in my fieldwork, all of the nuance regarding this phrase became flattened into a story that I predicted would be entertaining.

That in presentations about Peace Corps experience entertainment overrules complexity is not unexpected, but it still makes me uneasy. How are we representing the Other, in this narrative? I was not satisfied with a simplistic representation that could perpetuate neocolonial
discourses of Western complexity and knowledge as opposed to the ‘simple savage.’ The next time that I was asked about an interesting cultural difference, then, I tried to be more representative of nuance in the way I constructed my answer:

I remember that [the professor of this class] has asked us to share a cultural tidbit, so I talked about how meetings are run in Tanzania—they start really late, and then run until everyone agrees. No vote is ever taken—everyone has to agree on everything. [The professor] talks about how that is described in the Maasai book that they are reading, and how it’s funny—we call ourselves a democracy, but really a vote can be very divisive. She gives the example of if she asked what they wanted to do in class on Thursday, and 2/3 said watch the Lion King, but 1/3 said talk about the Serengeti, and she just immediately went with the 2/3, that the 1/3 might be really frustrated. I picked up on that thread, and said that though I was frustrated at how long meetings took, it was really cool because everyone had a right to be heard in those meetings. Even if you were a lone dissenter, they took you seriously, and listened to what you had to say. It was really cool how everyone had a voice.

In this example, rather than playing up my frustration at this way of holding meetings that is far from what may be considered ‘normal’ in the West—and easily could be framed as ‘a ridiculous waste of time’ from a Western hegemonic perspective—I admitted my frustration, but also shifted perspective to reveal the benefits of this method. The ploy for laughter in my first fieldnote example was based on a unidimensional assessment of a Tanzanian practice, told in such a way as to emphasize how ridiculous the practice seemed in comparison to ‘normal’ Western ways. The second example, on the other hand, attempts to focus instead on the practicality of the practice while still admitting the frustration a newcomer might feel. This example came from early in my tenure of observation; as I discuss later in this thesis, months of reflexivity led to even more intricate narratives.

**Conclusion**

Between participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, over the course of the school year I have gather a rich variety of data, showcasing the narrative construction of
expectations and experiences. This variety of encounters was spread over a long enough time that I was able to reflect and engage with emergent discursive themes. In the next section, I discuss the process of data analysis: how I engaged with the texts to find emic themes, etic themes, and construct my arguments, based on my theoretical and methodological foundations.

**Data Analysis**

**Analytic Approach: Narrative Analysis**

In performing data analysis, it was important to make certain that I stayed consistent with both my theoretical and methodological groundings. Yet, as I described above, my analysis aspired to begin with intrinsic, emic qualities of the texts, before moving on to applying outside theoretical considerations. Coming from a critical postcolonial theoretical perspective, intent on destabilizing hegemonic Western discourses and representations, this might seem like an odd move. It might seem to make more sense that a postcolonial scholar comes in with the idea that neocolonialism is inherent in the discourse, and start by looking for how. However, I proffer that beginning on the emic level, examining the text on its own terms, is not only an option for postcolonial scholars, but more consistent with postcolonial principles.

The goal of postcolonial scholarship is to destabilize hegemonic Western ideologies and epistemologies. Though I have some idea of what those are, and can critically reflect on my own implication in their reinforcement in some circumstances, there are surely others of which I am unaware. If I were to enter immediately into an etic analysis, I would find scarcely more than I am looking for: not only would I end up reinforcing aspects of neocolonial relations, I would reveal little in the discourse that had not already been written about and theorized.

On some level, postcolonial scholarship is about destabilizing those ideas of which we are most certain (Prasad, P., 2003). Beginning with an in-depth exploration of the text on its
own terms allowed me to go beyond what I would be most likely to notice, and engage with themes that I otherwise would have dismissed or ignored. That is not to say that I avoided critiquing imperialist and neocolonial discourses, but that the emic analysis gave me an extensive basis from which to better perform such criticisms.

Following my theoretical groundings, I entered the etic phase expecting that representations of nation, gender, race, sexuality, other issues of power, and their fundamental imbrications with and through each other would be salient in the discourses regarding volunteers, Host Country Nationals, volunteer experience, and Peace Corps itself as an organization.

Using the guidelines outlined above, I examined these texts for the narratives that they relate. Chase (2011), introducing narrative inquiry, describes narrative as

a distinct form of discourse: as meaning making through the shaping and ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time (p. 421).

People have even been described by some scholars as “homo narrans” (Fisher, 1984), implying that the definitive act of human existence is this act of meaning making: the relation of lived experience to story and narrative. Narrative is not held to the realm of fiction, but rather “has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination” (Fisher, 1984, p.2). In analyzing the various kinds of data which I have collected for this thesis, I find that the connecting thread is narratives constructed around what it means to be American, what it means to be a volunteer, and what it is that Peace Corps does.

In the narratives surrounding Peace Corps, it is interesting to note “what does and doesn’t get said, about what, why, how, and to whom” (Chase, 2011, p. 422). Volunteer experiences, relationships with Host Country Nationals, and the experience of being American in a ‘foreign’ land are often related in similar ways, showcasing the implication of hegemonic cultural
discourses on the way narratives are constructed. As “the practice of constructing meaningful selves, identities, and realities” (Chase, 2011, p. 422), narration allows for the narrator to situate herself in relation to cultural discourses. Thus, researchers may “treat narratives as a window to the contradictory and shifting nature of hegemonic discourses, which we tend to take for granted as stable monolithic forces” (Chase, 2011, p. 422). Though hegemonic discourses are often implicated in narratives, they are also resisted, ruptured, and destabilized.

Many narrative researchers focus their studies solely on these resistant narratives (Austin & Carpenter, 2008; Bhatia, 2008; Hole, 2007). The focus on narratives that destabilize dominant discourses lends an important lens to my work. For not only are dominant narratives appropriated, personalized, and re-shaped in communication surrounding Peace Corps recruitment and service, but they are also destabilized, and in some instances, ruptured. The places in which dominant narratives do not serve their sense-making purpose, and are discarded by storytellers, open space for postcolonial reimaginings. Thus, in this study, I use narrative analysis as a lens for viewing my data, in order to critique dominant, colonizing stories, and find openings for de-colonial thought and action.

**Postcolonial Self-Reflexivity in Data Analysis**

Postcolonial self-reflexivity is also considerably important in the formulation of an argument, and the process of writing a work itself. As Supriya (2001) notes, “As a textual performance, ethnographic self-reflexivity consists of *evoking* the voices, emotions, power dynamics and ethical concerns that animate fieldwork.” (p. 232, emphasis in original). Supriya is specifically concerned with the word “evoking” here, in a position where others might have used “representing,” as a signifier that the scholar’s work is *not* to represent, but to bring to life not only the events and phenomena in the text, but also the affective and political dimensions
surrounding and inundating them. “Representation” has a feel of stability; Supriya wants the political tensions, struggles, and shifts to be evident in the final written piece. The act of writing research is just as political as the act of performing it.

In the process of writing this thesis, I attempted to engage with both text and context in a way which evoked the complexity of voices and situations. Peace Corps narratives are neither wholly problematic nor wholly emancipatory; every story is a contested space where ideological tensions and contradictions are negotiated. As a matter of postcolonial reflexivity in writing this piece, I was very conscious of the way that I evoked the Host Country National, attempting to show that the underlying narrative represents the Host County National in a certain near-monolithic way, without re-producing that narrative myself.

I was also careful not to remove myself from the colonizing implications that I found contained in returned Peace Corps narratives. I was a Peace Corps volunteer, and the way in which I interact with other returned volunteers and prospective volunteers reveals the same cultural narratives that I found throughout my fieldwork in the stories of others. Therefore, in Chapter IV, I critique not only the narratives of people that I interviewed and interacted with, but also my own. Critical consciousness is a continual struggle, constantly formed and reformed in interaction. It is not something that one ‘has’ or ‘achieves.’ Therefore, by including myself as the subject of critique with other returned volunteers, I hope to make clear that these returned volunteers may be struggling with critical consciousness as well. As I argue in Chapter V, Peace Corps, though a privileged experience, ultimately creates space for rupturing hegemonic narratives and working towards critical consciousness.

**Organization and Arrangement of Chapters**
Now that the theoretical and methodological groundwork has been set, I would like to outline and briefly describe the chapters of this thesis. The remaining chapters are entitled as follows:

II. Organizational Narratives of the Volunteer: Normative Whiteness in Peace Corps Recruitment Pamphlets
III. Making a Difference: The Politics of Knowledge and Learning in “Effective” Service
IV. Having the Power to Empower: The Raced and Gendered Basis of American Exceptionalism
V. Peace Corps Volunteer Narratives and the Disruption of Hegemony
VI. Conclusion

The four chapters of analysis follow a movement from authority to resistance, from official to unofficial, from simple to complex. Chapter II, “Organizational Narratives of the Volunteer: Normative Whiteness in Peace Corps Recruitment Pamphlets,” examines informational pamphlets about Peace Corps service and the narrative they construct as to who the normative volunteer is and, by extension, who the normative American is. These official documents are written and distributed by the Peace Corps, and though they include quotes from returned volunteers, the structure and text of the pamphlets is designed otherwise entirely by the organization itself. This then gives the most purposefully constructed narrative of what it is to be a Peace Corps volunteer.

The next chapter, “Making a Difference: The Politics of Knowledge and Learning in ‘Effective’ Service,” moves to a slightly more complex level. This book is also an official publication of the U.S. Peace Corps, yet the stories included in the book were written by individual returned volunteers. So, though Peace Corps chose which stories would be included and published them, the publication includes a disclaimer, saying that “The opinions expressed in A Life Inspired: Tales of Peace Corps Service are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Peace Corps or the government of the United States” (2008c, n.p.).
Though individual statements and opinions from the text cannot be said to be those of the Peace Corps, the general narrative constructed by the combination of stories can be said to be constructed by Peace Corps since the organization chose the stories which should be placed in this book from a host of available authors and texts. The website Peace Corps Journals (Peace Corps Journals, 2010), an online collection of Peace Corps blogs, has over 10,000 current bloggers (Peace Corps Journals, 2010). Yet, Peace Corps Journals is only one collection of Peace Corps stories. Others, such as ThirdGoal.org (Third Goal, Inc., 2011) include hundreds more stories and experiences.

Peace Corps chose 28 out of thousands of stories, presumably in order to best package the book as a recruitment tool. In this chapter, I first analyze the primary narrative that runs throughout the stories, and argue that it is both Americentric and imperialist. Concluding with an examination of two counternarratives, I ultimately argue that centering the intercultural relationship, rather than one culture or the other, causes a destabilization of Americentrism and imperialism.

The last two chapters of this thesis, “Having the Power to Empower: The Raced and Gendered Basis of American Exceptionalism,” and “Peace Corps Volunteer Narratives and the Disruption of Hegemony,” examine the intricacies of constructing narratives within situated interactions. These chapters are based off of the ethnographic data that I collected through interviews and participant observation. The contingent nature of conversation allowed more space for destabilizing hegemonic colonizing narratives often found in the official organizational literature. However, the collaborative communicative construction of these narratives did not necessarily lead to destabilization. Often, colonizing narratives are reproduced, or reinforced. Therefore, in the first chapter regarding conversational dynamics, I examine narratives that
reinforce an idea of U.S. benevolence and the White Man’s Burden, and in the second chapter I examine the areas where these narratives are ruptured, and the spaces that are created for future decolonizing narratives. I argue in Chapter IV that the White Man’s Burden requires a certain type of American exceptionalism that is both raced and gendered in order to be enacted. Further, in Chapter V, I argue that though Peace Corps is a privileged experience that often reinscribes hegemonic ideologies, it is also the Peace Corps experience that allows for those to be questioned, destabilized, and ruptured.

In the concluding chapter, I review my findings, and provide implications for present postcolonial theory and future research in this area. In moving from simple to complex narratives, I reveal opportunities for rupturing (neo)colonial discourses, and creating new, decolonizing stories. Since postcolonial theory and criticism is relatively new as academic fields go, the majority of work that has been done thus far has been criticism of the imperial West, and the way in which the West reinscribes itself as a hegemonic power through representation of the Other. As I have mentioned, little postcolonial work, especially in the field of communication, has been done in theorizing decolonizing stories, discourses, and relations (Broadfoot, Munshi, & Nelson-Marsh, 2010; Chawla & Rodriguez, 2011; Norander & Harter, 2012). Thus, this thesis contributes not only to the burgeoning postcolonial movement in the field of communication, but also to postcolonial theory as it reimagines current relations between the United States (as represented in the Peace Corps) and countries of the Global South.

This research project thus examines the narrative construction of expectations and experience regarding the Peace Corps. Using a postcolonial theoretical lens that is sensitive to power dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality, I analyze the neocoloniality and possibility for decoloniality of narratives of Peace Corps recruitment, as well as the way that returned
volunteers communicatively reconstruct their experience. This project answers invitations for postcolonial work in the field as a whole (Hegde, 1998; Shome, 2003, 2006; Shome & Hedge, 2002a, 2002b) as well as in critical intercultural communication (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010; Moon, 2010; Shome, 2010), organizational communication (Prasad, A., 2003; Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007) and rhetoric (Shome, 1996, Chawla & Rodriguez, 2011) in particular.
CHAPTER II
ORGANIZATIONAL NARRATIVES OF THE VOLUNTEER: NORMATIVE WHITENESS IN PEACE CORPS RECRUITMENT PAMPHLETS

Introduction

Beginning Thoughts

On the website of the United States Peace Corps there is a section entitled “In Their Own Words,” with links to stories about volunteer experiences (Peace Corps, n.d.). One would assume it is set up for recruitment purposes: to pique the interest of would-be volunteers, or give them a sense for what life will be like “in the field.” The veracity of such narratives has been questioned by other authors (Polonijo-King, 2004), and I will not address it here. What I would like to highlight, however, is the convenient feature that allows the prospective adventurer to search through the story-archive, and set specifications on what kind of story she would like to read. A volunteer planning to go to Africa can read stories of life in Africa; a volunteer who will work as a teacher can read stories of other Peace Corps teachers. In addition, the volunteer can limit the search by age, “gender” (sex), or “ethnicity” (race).

At first glance, this seems to be very sensitive to issues of race and gender, showcasing the “diversity” of the Peace Corps experience. However, as Ahmed (2006, 2009) has written about in institutions of higher education, the marketing of diversity does not necessarily correspond to diverse organizations. In fact, she claims that such (racial) strategies become “about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organisations [sic]” (2009, p. 45; emphasis in original) themselves, which serves to conceal the underlying, persistent ideological inequalities (Ahmed, 2006). In this chapter, I examine how Peace Corps recruitment pamphlets serve, in a similar manner, to (re)conceal ideological inequalities by
constructing a narrative where the ‘normal’ volunteer is white and middle-class. Rather than materials that *market* the diversity already (seemingly) present in an organization, I analyze materials that attempt to *recruit* (racially) diverse individuals. This differs notably from Ahmed’s studies. Diversity in this instance is not a means, but rather an end. What Peace Corps is attempting to do—foster an understanding of Americans on the part of other peoples, and vise versa—is admirable. Admirable, as well, is the goal of recruiting racially diverse individuals for Peace Corps service, to show the multiplicity of ways in which ‘the American’ is embodied. It is ironic, then, that these materials actually achieve the opposite in the way that they are presented. In many ways, the narrative that is constructed in these materials conflates ‘American’ with whiteness, and implies that the normative volunteer is white.

Thus, I argue that the way Peace Corps recruitment pamphlets construct the story of “the volunteer” serves to reinscribe both normative whiteness and neocolonialism through different intersections of race, class, and gender. I hope to render a critique that will reveal and deconstruct these narratives of race and nation, in order that future materials may support, rather than undermine, Peace Corps’ explicit goals.

**Getting Started**

Over a year ago, I was contacted by the Peace Corps recruiter at WU, a large, public university, and asked if I would be part of a panel of returned Peace Corps volunteers at a recruitment event. She then said she would love to meet me, and that I was welcome to stop by her office anytime to reminisce about Peace Corps experiences. I took her up on her offer, and dropped by one day to chat. When I entered the office, a small room on the fourth floor of the student center, she was in the midst of a conversation with someone else. Sitting down to wait, I noticed a colorful display on my right. A rack of different pamphlets about Peace Corps service

As a burgeoning feminist, antiracist, and postcolonial scholar I was immediately intrigued, and grabbed one of each to take home for further analysis, which garnered an odd look from the recruiter. “What are you going to do with those?” she asked me after her guest had left, probably wondering what need a returned volunteer has of such materials.

“Study them,” I replied.

“I see.” She looked vaguely anxious. “What department are you from again?”

“Communication,” I answered. “I’m interested in how these represent race and gender.”

She visibly relaxed. “Oh! Well, then, you can see how each minority has their own pamphlet, and both men and women are pictured!”

For so many, as Ahmed (2006) astutely noted, representations of diversity are enough to warrant pride in the organization, as if images are, in and of themselves, an accomplishment of equality. In this chapter, I analyze how these images work to construct a narrative that describes the volunteer of color as an oddity that needs to be persuaded and rewarded to join Peace Corps, as opposed to the (white) people who have the privilege of choosing to “give two years of their lives” (Peace Corps, 2008a, emphasis mine). These racializations are also intricately connected with aspects of nation. To be a Peace Corps volunteer, one must be an U.S. citizen, and part of the Peace Corps’ explicit goals is for the volunteer to be a representation of America (Peace Corps, 2008b). This chapter examines how Peace Corps narrates what it means to be a volunteer, and by extension what it means to be an American. I also analyze the racial and colonial implications of these narratives.
An Introduction to Whiteness

First of all, it is useful to note what whiteness is. It is not simply the state of having a white body, but rather a socially constructed ideology which is inherently oppressive and without any biological basis, yet having material consequences (Roediger, 1991). Whiteness oppresses by façade; it is a racial identity that masquerades as non-racial, universal, and ‘normal.’ It holds a silent hegemony, for it claims to be ‘just the way things are.’ Yet, at the same time, it is not monolithic and stable, but changes form depending on the current moment of society (Omi & Winant, 1994) or interpersonal situation (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) in order to maintain hegemony. Some may question the emancipatory utility of centering whiteness in analysis—it may seem to simply reinforce its power. Though as a white researcher I should be intensely reflective on writing about whiteness, it must be addressed in order to be dethroned. When whiteness is accepted as an invisible norm, differences are ignored; and “white people, their assumptions, and ways are empowered” (Grimes, 2002, p. 382); thus it is important to bring such invisible norms to light, that they might be dismantled.

However, there is a dearth of research in the field with this specific focus, even though scholars have argued that areas of the field of communication itself are raced (Alley-Young, 2008; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003). In addition, whiteness affects the field of communication, especially intercultural communication, in three ways: “by implicitly defining American as ‘white’; by ignoring transnational relationships developed through migration, displacement, colonization, and imperialism; and by overlooking the voices and experiences of marginalized Americans” (Moon citing Nakayama & Martin, 2010, p. 42). In fact, Nakayama and Martin argue that the way to correct these issues is through a postcolonial understanding of communication. Only this would serve to truly “de-center whiteness and include postcolonial
notions of culture and identity and a deeper reflexivity on the part of white scholars as they study the ‘Other’” (Moon citing Nakayama & Martin, 2010, p. 42).

Though whiteness studies are a growing endeavor in the field of communication, little has been done using postcolonial theory. In organizational communication, for instance, whiteness has been theorized by Grimes (2002) and examined in connection with other intersectional dynamics by Leonard (2010). Whiteness studies has also been taken up by rhetoricians (Endres & Gould, 2009; Flores & Moon, 2002; Foley, 2010; Moon & Flores, 2000; Shome, 2000) and intercultural communication scholars (Lacy, 2010; Moon, 2010; Steyn, 2010; Warren, 2010). However, few scholars (Alley-Young, 2008; Shome, 2010) have addressed the transnational or postcolonial implications of whiteness studies. As one example of such work, Alley-Young’s 2008 study is worth examining in slightly more depth.

Alley-Young (2008) specifically takes the relationship between postcolonial studies and whiteness studies as the focal point of his piece. He examines the two fields’ intersections and divergences, finding that both can supplement the other in meaningful ways, arguing that “[j]uxtaposing postcolonial and whiteness perspectives allows for an exploration of the myriad ways in which the body is inscribed, displaced, replaced, and obscured with meaning” (p. 318). In a postcolonial study such as this, adding analysis of whiteness can help to better explain the intersecting dynamics of race and nation at play in Peace Corps recruitment materials. Notably, Alley-Young comments that, “It seems that it could be the invisible nature of whiteness…that allows it to evade the scrutiny of postcolonial thought” (p. 312), realizing that the inherent invisibility of whiteness has affected even critical scholars in other fields, such as postcolonial scholars. In fact, Alley-Young, citing Martin and Davis, also describes how intercultural
communication scholars, due to the normalizing power of whiteness, will even speak of Americans as a homogenous subject group.

Clearly, whiteness is an important facet to consider in postcolonial power relations. As Shome (2000) describes whiteness, it is inseparable from global imperialism:

Whiteness, then, is not a monolithic formation—it is constantly made and remade through its participation in other unequal social relations; it is a nuanced formation that secures its power in different ways through different sites—all of which nonetheless, secures its hegemony in a highly racialized global system. (p. 368)

Thus, it is important for any postcolonial project to take it into account. However, whiteness studies is also a contested realm. Moon and Flores (2000) raise concern that whiteness, when interrogated on its own as a single dimension of power, may serve to reinscribe other avenues of power such as patriarchy and heteronormativity, and in some cases even serve to recenter white bodies. Shome (2000) notes a similar problematic possibility in studying whiteness, but argues that “the dangers of not examining whiteness are as great, if not greater, than the risks that examining whiteness may pose” (p. 370, emphasis in original), concluding that the issue hinges around “how whiteness [is] studied and for what political and reflexive end (p. 370, emphasis in original). Moon and Flores come to a similar conclusion, and argue that studying whiteness as one piece of an intersectional analysis may avoid reinscribing or naturalizing other hegemonic power dynamics.

Thus, this chapter analyzes Peace Corps recruitment pamphlets from an intersectional position, concerned with the relationships between nation, race, gender and class. At this point, I should clarify that I did not engage with the material initially looking for whiteness. Rather, after cataloguing emergent themes from the texts, I found them to be telling a story of whiteness. Then, proceeding with Moon and Flores (2000) in mind, I examined how this narrative shifted
when engaging with different axes of power. In constructing this chapter, then, I attempted to relate the complicated interweaving of multiple power dynamics. Thus, I engage in a postcolonial-intersectional analysis of these Peace Corps brochures, examining the connections between Americans and white bodies, how those relate to Americentricism, and the narrative told of the volunteer relating to the Host Country National. In addition, I weave gender and class analysis into the chapter, where especially salient. I argue that, through raced and gendered representations of Peace Corps volunteers in these pamphlets, a narrative is constructed which equates the normative American with whiteness and reinforces American global hegemony.

In the sections that follow, I first describe the Peace Corps as an organization, its influence, and its importance. Turning to the pamphlets, I examine how whiteness is reinscribed as normative through variances in the presentation of different bodies. I begin by exploring how the pamphlets present the volunteer as normatively housed in a white body. Within this discussion, I examine how that body holds power over the Host Country National, and thus serves a neocolonialist function. I then turn to the differences between the two different types of pamphlets, and a consideration of their ramifications. Finally, I analyze “Worker” pamphlets; by focusing specifically on two of the four, I reveal how intersections of race and gender emphasize and (re)normalize different aspects of whiteness.

A Narrative of Whiteness

The Peace Corps

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3 ‘Host country national’ is the preferred Peace Corps term to refer to citizens of the countries to which Peace Corps volunteers are sent, and as such will be used when describing Peace Corps documents in this chapter. I considered abbreviating this to ‘HCN’, however, felt uncomfortable with the objectifying implications of such a move.
The Peace Corps is an independent U.S. government organization which has sent more than 200,000 Americans to serve in 139 countries over the past fifty years (Peace Corps, 2011). As such, the way in which it represents race, gender, class, and nation in its material is reflective of the view of the State, and holds tremendous influence. On the website under the heading, “Who Volunteers?” it states:

Peace Corps has thousands of volunteer opportunities for Americans aged 18 or over who are interested in public service abroad. The agency has always reflected the diversity of America and is actively recruiting the next generation of Peace Corps Volunteers. One of the goals of the Peace Corps is to help the people of other countries gain a better understanding of Americans and our multicultural society. The agency actively recruits people with a variety of backgrounds and experiences to best share our nation's greatest resource—its people—with the communities where Volunteers serve around the globe (Peace Corps, 2012).

The explicit description of the Peace Corps as “multicultural” and representing “diversity” is notable in this passage. This lip-service to equality is just as Ahmed (2006) described: the explicit statements serve to hide the implicit hegemony, as I will show.

It is also notable that, according to the website, the job of Peace Corps Volunteers is to “help countless individuals who want to build a better life for themselves, their children, and their communities” (Peace Corps, 2011). The implications of this statement through a postcolonial lens are clear. The (powerful, Western, white) volunteer goes abroad to help those who “want” a better life, but cannot achieve it on their own. The Host Country National is constructed, in these statements, as non-agentic – unable to act on his/her own. Reiterations of both this (neocolonial) narrative and that of “diversity” will be seen throughout the recruitment materials themselves.

**Recruitment Materials**

At WU, the recruitment pamphlets are prominently displayed in the Peace Corps office, directly to the right of the visitor seating. Since the pamphlets’ publication in 2003, hundreds of
students have entered the office and been drawn to the pamphlets by the flash of color in the corner of their eyes. Portable and intriguing, they are an excellent option for easy informational access. Given this university’s high ranking in the annals of Peace Corps recruitment, there has most likely been a large audience for these recruitment materials at this university alone, not to mention others where the pamphlets are distributed.

There are nine different 8-panel pamphlets available, each folded from a single piece of paper. The assumed intention of these brochures is to entice prospective volunteers to apply for Peace Corps service. Each pamphlet has both color and black-and-white sections, with pictures of volunteers in service as well as headshots of individual (assumed) volunteers, augmented with written text. The text includes descriptions of specific positions and qualifications necessary for them, personal quotes from volunteers, and enticements into service. As will be discussed further later, each type of text is not included in every pamphlet.

Every pamphlet does, however, have a plain white back page with a mailing address, Peace Corps logo, and tagline: “Life is calling. How far will you go?” Also similar in each brochure is the immediate center pages, with a box in the top-right corner describing the “Mission of the Peace Corps” and the left-hand page giving (exactly the same in each) general information regarding the Peace Corps. The pictures surrounding these texts are different in each pamphlet. Though the remainder of the layout is similar, the text, pictures, and focus differ greatly between each pamphlet.

Five pamphlets focus on a specific type of work that can be done as a Peace Corps volunteer. I will refer to these as Work pamphlets. They are entitled, respectively:

• “Community development through mentoring and teaching” (Education)—This pamphlet describes the types of work available in the realms of youth development, community development and education.
• “The business of helping others help themselves” (Business)—The focus here is on the word “business,” and it describes types of business and information technology work.
• “Use your talents to help others grow” (Agriculture)—This brochure describes the type of agricultural and environmental work available, thus the use of the word “grow.”
• “A journey of hope” (HIV/AIDS)—This one specifically refers to HIV/AIDS work in a variety of sectors.
• “Opportunities in health and HIV/AIDS” (Health)—This one is, just as it says, about types of health and HIV/AIDS work.

The other four pamphlets focus on the “opportunity” present for specific ethnic groups. These I will refer to as Worker pamphlets. They are entitled, respectively:

• “An Exceptional Opportunity for African Americans”
• “An Exceptional Opportunity for Asian Americans”
• “An Exceptional Opportunity for American Indians and Alaskan Natives”
• “An Exceptional Opportunity for Latinos”

By analyzing the way in which text and images work together in these brochures, and the differences between different Worker pamphlets, as well as across the Work and Worker pamphlets, I argue that these pamphlets, from a variety of intersections, serve to reinscribe whiteness as normative and normalize a neocolonial Americentric perspective.

The (White) Body of the Volunteer in the Work Pamphlets

The pictures in these brochures are unlabeled. They stand alone, and though supplemented by quotes and other text, these writings do not refer to the pictures themselves but rather serve to lend a certain air to the brochure as a whole. Since the images picture both volunteers and Host Country Nationals, it begs the question: who is the volunteer, and how is that made clear?

One of the first things that struck me, when looking across the Work-themed pamphlets, is that volunteers of color are rarely pictured alone, or with similarly-aged peers. In fact, in every picture that features a volunteer of color, there’s another “clue” present to tip off the reader
to who the volunteer is. However, in pictures (re)presenting white volunteers, no “clue” is deemed necessary – white volunteers are often pictured alone, or with peers. This implies that the volunteer of color must be given legitimacy of some sort, but that the white volunteer is already legitimate simply because of his white body. These images serve to (re)normalize that the volunteer is housed in a white body.

**Clue #1: The volunteer of color is shown with children.**

Volunteers of color are pictured, in a variety of places, teaching or holding children. On the cover page of the Health brochure, a Black woman that we are led to assume is the volunteer is shown holding a baby. In two different pictures of the Business pamphlet, a volunteer of color—one woman and one man—is shown standing over a group of students who are sitting at a table. The Education pamphlet cover shows a female volunteer of color (standing and) instructing a classroom full of (sitting) children. In all of these images, the ‘volunteer’ of color is placed in conjunction with those that can automatically be ruled out as prospective ‘volunteers’; the children cannot possibly be volunteers because of their age.

The ways in which the “clues” differ across gendered bodies is highly interesting. For instance, the two images in the Business pamphlet—that show volunteers standing over children—are very dissimilar. The man standing over the children is shown tinkering with a computer, not looking at the children, but focused instead on the technology. The woman, however, is leaning over two children, nearly embracing them, watching them as they work on a computer. Thus, even as these pictures serve to normalize whiteness, they also reinforce hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity. The tech-savvy, scientific, rational man focused on the computer, rather than the people, is juxtaposed with the caring, emotionally-laboring woman, more focused on the people than the technology.
Clue #2: The volunteer of color is pictured with technology.

Working with technology can itself be conceptualized as a “clue,” on a few levels. Again, the two volunteers of color mentioned above are shown working with a computer, which, coupled with the assumption of U.S. technological superiority, serves to legitimize the people of color as volunteers. This assumption of U.S. technological superiority, that I have so blithely stated as if it were naturally obvious, deserves to be interrogated. The text of the pamphlet paints this (assumed) picture, stating that “In response to the changing needs of a global economy and the expansion of computer use in developing nations, the number of business and information technology volunteers continue to grow.” Thus, these pictures can be read as additional clues – the volunteer of color is shown working with technology in order to make up for the lack of a white body, and still be seen as a legitimate volunteer.

However, this connection of the American volunteer to technology, and the (re)presentation of the Host Country National in opposition as technologically illiterate (or at least, in need of American technological assistance), is not apolitical. From a postcolonial perspective, it is important to note that information and computer technology (ICT) can serve a neocolonialist function (Gopal, Willis, & Gopal, 2003). In fact, Gopal, Willis, & Gopal (2003) go so far as to say that “far from being emancipatory, as the elites of both core and peripheral societies would have us believe, ICTs might actually represent the most potentially effective means of continuing the project of dominance inaugurated during colonial times” (p. 239). This combination of narratives then reveals one neocolonial undertone of these brochures: the assumption of U.S. superiority in ICT, which, when acted upon, serves to (re)produce power differentials.

Clue #3: The volunteer of color watches as the Host Country Nationals work.
In the Business pamphlet, one woman of color is sitting on the outside of a circle of women who sewing. The outside woman simply sits, watching. The obvious separation from the group, as well as her hands-off, aloof demeanor reveals a difference from the other women. That difference can be read as: ‘volunteer.’ Thus, watching as Host Country Nationals work is another way the volunteer of color can be authenticated.

Obviously, the Western volunteer—who is ostensibly there to serve—(re)presented as sitting back and watching as the Host Country Nationals do domestic work, has gendered as well as neocolonial implications. It (re)affirms the ‘place’ of the (female) Westerner in the host country – there to help with teaching, technological, or other ‘advanced’ work that places her in a position of authority over the Host Country Nationals, and yet ‘charmed’ to learn about the ‘quaint’ work of the natives. This (re)presentation is reminiscent of Pushkala Prasad’s (2003) ethnographic imagination, where “identities and relationships that are vividly reminiscent of colonial dynamics” (p. 150) are reproduced out of nostalgia for the (valorized) ethnographic adventurers of old. Though Prasad specifically looks at third-world tourism and museums, her theory also translates into the world of international aid, revealing the neocolonial undergirding of this image.

The image is also clearly gendered, reinforcing stereotypical understandings of “women’s work.” The women are shown sewing, with the volunteer in the background watching intensely, curious to learn. This set-up implies that we have something to gain from the ‘quaint,’ ‘old-fashioned’ ways of the natives: referring back to P. Prasad (2003), the gendering of this image when viewed through the lens of the ‘ethnographic imagination’ reveals a longing to return to the ways of old, when things were simpler, and women knew their place.

**Clue #4: The volunteer of color is branded with Peace Corps insignia.**
If all else fails, the volunteer of color is simply shown wearing Peace Corps insignia. The Peace Corps branding is an obvious volunteer designation, which leaves no doubt as to the volunteer’s legitimacy. This last-resort is used in the Education and Business pamphlets, in conjunction with other clues.

No clues necessary: The white volunteer stands out/alone.

The previous section shows clearly that there are “clues” in order to show who the volunteer is, when that person is a person of color. However, for the white volunteer, no clues are necessary. In multiple pamphlets, white volunteers are pictured interacting with peers: an older, female volunteer talking with an older woman at the market, a male volunteer at a table of (presumed) businessmen, a male volunteer teaching with an (assumed) Host Country National peer, a female volunteer shaking the hand of a Host Country National farmer. The reader does not need to be “clued” in to who the volunteer is in these pictures; whiteness itself is enough of a designation. This not only normalizes that the volunteer is housed in a white body, but that the normative American is white. The conceptualization of ‘volunteer’ in the context of Peace Corps is inextricably tied to that of ‘nation.’

As per usual, these images have implications not only for race, but also gender. The men are pictured in positions of authority—in a business meeting, teaching—while the women are shown performing emotional labor—smiling with another (Host Country National) woman at the market, shaking someone’s hand. The reinforcement of normative (white) masculinity and femininity is clear.

Furthermore, white volunteers, unlike volunteers of color, are pictured alone. One man is shown on a computer, another holding a farming implement of some sort. In a third picture, a white man and a white woman stand in front of a chalkboard, the suggestion being that they are
teaching, though no students are shown. The Host Country Nationals do not need to be shown in these pictures because the whiteness of the body is enough for the volunteer to be recognized. There is no need to show him interacting with Host Country Nationals as a “clue” to who the volunteer is. Yet, what if a volunteer of color were to be pictured alone? The implication is that without the relational clues discussed above, where the volunteer is somehow differentiated from the Host Country Nationals, the reader would be unable to tell if the picture were of a volunteer or a Host Country National. The normative volunteer body is white; the volunteer of color is the exception. Thus, legitimizing the volunteer of color through clues serves to reinforce whiteness as normative, even as it reinstates hegemonic masculinity and performs neocolonialism.

Further, these images imply that the Host Country National is necessarily a person of color. Though Peace Corps works in Eastern European countries, and other places with predominantly white populations, throughout all the pamphlets there are few images that represent those people. Even those (three) images present are small and hidden in corners of pamphlets. Compared to the large, full-panel pictures of Host Country Nationals of color, the implication is that the normative Host Country National is of color, just as the normative volunteer is white.

In this way, the Peace Corps reinscribes the “racialization of pity” that Balaji (2011) describes. In his examination of the raced response to the Haiti earthquake, Balaji begins with the basis that “poverty and famine have long been associated with a dark, non-white world, a place where tragedy and hopelessness reign and where one’s success is determined by the compassion of (white) Others” (p. 52). As Peace Corps’ work is based on sending assistance to countries in need of trained workers, it is no surprise that the narrative of these pamphlets utilizes a similar dichotomized racialization of nations and pity.
Work vs. The Worker: Race and Class (Re)Inscriptions

As has been mentioned, but not discussed up until this point, there are four Peace Corps pamphlets designed to appeal to prospective volunteers of certain races/ethnicities: African Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians/Alaskan Natives, and “Latinos.” There is no one pamphlet specifically for the White would-be volunteer. The sheer fact that these pamphlets exist, combined with the fact that a white one does not, has racial implications. In addition, the different narratives of race and gender in these pamphlets serve to imply class distinctions for different bodies.

The initial, obvious reading of these Worker pamphlets (and the absence of a white Worker pamphlet) is the normalization of the general volunteer as white. A specific brochure for the white (non-Hispanic) worker is unnecessary; as was demonstrated above, the normative volunteer is understood to be white. Thus, every pamphlet unless otherwise designated is for the white volunteer. This does not need to be explicated; it is understood. However, there is another, slightly hidden conclusion that can be drawn. The volunteer of color needs to be enticed into Peace Corps service, while the white volunteer does not. This serves to intimate that the white volunteer is of a certain, privileged class that can choose to serve overseas, whereas the lower-class volunteer of color must be persuaded.

The style of text in the Work pamphlets is dramatically different from that of the Worker pamphlets. The Work pamphlets, designed for the normative (white) volunteer, provide the reader with job descriptions and necessary qualifications that the (white) worker must have in order to qualify. Here, the Peace Corps is not concerned with convincing the (white) volunteer to apply, but rather weeding through the (privileged) applicants to find those with the right skills. On the other hand, the Worker pamphlets are nearly devoid of information regarding
qualifications (and the presence of qualifications in one Worker pamphlet, as will be discussed later, serves to debase volunteers of color even further). Instead, there are sections describing “Benefits of Service,” “What Peace Corps Provides During Service,” and “Volunteer Safety and Security,” which delineate what the volunteer of color will receive in return for his (burdensome) commitment. The volunteer of color is not narrated as being privileged enough to choose to serve in the Peace Corps without material benefits. Thus, the volunteer of color is (re)inscribed as low-class, while the (implied) white volunteer is economically privileged. The specific narratives of class across different intersections of identity will be discussed in a following section.

The framing of each type of pamphlet is also worth deconstructing. The title, “An Exceptional Opportunity for…” implies that not only is Peace Corps work something that will benefit the non-white volunteer, but that it is also out-of-the-ordinary—an exception to the rule. This can be taken in more than one way: the experience of volunteering is outside of the norm for people of color, or that people of color are outside of the normal embodiment of ‘the volunteer.’ I aver that both readings are accurate and serve to reinforce what I have already argued: the first, that the volunteer of color is (re)presented as low-class, and the second, that the normative volunteer is white.

Balaji (2011) also speaks of the racialization of pity in terms of Black/white populations in the U.S. He shows that there is a “universalizing of the black experience as being pitiful, inferior, and incapable of functionality” (p. 54) across borders, in the U.S. as well as other, ‘developing’ countries. This may seem to contradict the equation of ‘American’ with ‘white’ in the nationalizing of raced pity, but actually reveals that U.S.-based populations of color are also in need of (normatively white) American pity, as they are low-class, struggling, “incapable of
functionality” without it. There is a similar move here in these pamphlets. Though there is a hierarchy created between the volunteer and the Host Country National, this position of power is slightly lowered for volunteers of color. They are not the ‘rule’ of volunteers; they are the ‘exception.’

Yet, the word “exceptional” is not the only term of note in the above title. “Opportunity” is also worth discussing. This word is rarely used in the Work pamphlets, and when it is, it is often referring to how the volunteer creates opportunities for the Host Country National, rather than how the volunteer himself is given opportunities. Instead, the word “service” is used to describe Peace Corps volunteer work in the Work pamphlets. These two different framings of Peace Corps as “opportunity” or “service” reveal the different class conceptualizations attached to white and non-white volunteers, as well as a hidden paternalism. The naturalized white volunteer is assumed to be of middle-class background, to have the economic privilege to decide to spend two years “helping others” and doing “service,” while the non-white worker is assumed to be lower-class, not having the privilege to decide to help others, as he/she must help him/herself. Thus Peace Corps is framed as an “opportunity,” and the reader is given examples of what he/she will gain from Peace Corps work. The low-class worker of color must be given personal incentive in order to serve.

This assumption of privilege in the normalized (white) worker also reveals a hidden paternalism in the action of “serving.” The volunteer is the one who serves, and it is the white volunteer who serves. Here, whiteness becomes conflated with American-ness. It is implied that the white volunteer has more knowledge and skill than the Host Country National, and thus is able to ‘help’ or ‘serve.’ However, in a neocolonialist fashion, the Host Country National is relegated to a passive role, that of ‘being helped.’ Yet the Host County National is not alone in
this; the work of the volunteer of color is rarely presented as "service." Instead, it is an "opportunity," an "exceptional" offer that they should not let slip by—a chance of a lifetime that the person of color will not get again. This reveals not only a neocolonial paternalism, but also a racist paternalism. The normative volunteer is white, and the normative American is white. Prospective volunteers of color are getting a deal, a bargain—it’s their lucky day. The American (read: white) Peace Corps staff have the privilege to give the volunteer of color access to this “exceptional opportunity,” just as the American (read: white) volunteer has the privilege to give two years of her life in service to Host Country Nationals (read: of color).

The final distinction between Work and Worker brochures that I would like to address is a quote that is found in each Worker pamphlet, but not in those of Work. “Your commitment to family and community and desire to help others are essential to the Peace Corps’ mission of facilitating global development while helping people of other countries gain a better understanding of our nation’s multicultural society.” This quote is the only time in which the reader is addressed in the second person in any pamphlet (other than the title of one pamphlet, “Use your talents to help others grow”). At all other times, and in all other (Work) pamphlets, volunteers are spoken of only in the third person. This quote further shows that the worker of color needs personalized overtures in order to consider Peace Corps work. He does not have the privilege of the white worker to choose, but must be convinced, persuaded, and cajoled.

Worker Pamphlets: Racializations and Intersections

The voice of the volunteer of color.

To begin this section, I would like to consider a difference in construction across the Worker pamphlets that raises some intriguing thoughts. Each pamphlet has a page of quotations from returned volunteers, but the way in which they are presented varies. In the Latino and
Asian American pamphlets, the quotations are placed in white type on blue backgrounds, with a small picture of a volunteer-in-action above. Each quote is accompanied by the volunteer’s name, country of service, and dates of service. The American Indian/Alaskan Native pamphlet, in addition to this, also includes the volunteer’s tribe. The African American pamphlet, strikingly, has a heading, “What Former African American Volunteers Say” and headshots of (one assumes) the two quoted volunteers, in place of the picture of the volunteer-in-action. I will show how these differences display further (re)institutionalization of the normative volunteer as white.

This conclusion may not initially be obvious: the situation is similar to how each of the Work pamphlets required a “clue” in the pictures of volunteers of color to tip-off the reader as to the identity of the volunteer. Since the normative understanding of ‘volunteer’ is white, a non-white worker would not immediately register as a volunteer without such “clues.” In the same manner, since the normative understanding of the volunteer is white, the quotes in these Worker pamphlets require some sort of “clue” or verification that these volunteers being quoted are not normative but rather “exceptional;” that is, non-white. Thus, these quotes each include a type of ethnic signature.

In the Latino and Asian American pamphlets, the names of each of the people quoted are stereotypical-sounding Latino and Asian names, respectively. The names of the people themselves—Hy, Nguy, Rivera, Galdamez—serve as a verification of ethnicity. They are thus separated from the normative assumption of whiteness. The tribal identification of the American Indian/Alaskan Natives serves this purpose in their brochure. Therefore, the reason that the African Americans are individually pictured is to authenticate the Blackness of the quoted voices. Without stereotypical names or a tribal affiliation, there is no way to determine the race
of those quoted, so it is assumed that the reader will “naturally” identify the volunteers as white. Just in case the pictures were not enough of a racial clue, the quotations are titled “What Former African American Volunteers Say” so there can be no mistake: these are Black voices.

There is work going into ensuring that these voices are perceived as authentically and accurately raced. The narrative that is created by the pamphlets normalizes the volunteer body as white-skinned, implying that the normative voice of the volunteer is a white voice. Thus these, in order not to be identified by default as white, must be clearly differentiated from whiteness. This work to differentiate white voices from voices of color serves to further strengthen the dominant narrative: that the normative volunteer is white.

**The racialized undertones of the American Indian/Alaskan Native pamphlet.**

The pamphlet designed for the American Indian and Alaskan Native, like the Latino pamphlet, also includes a rather interesting textual object, a statement that does not appear in any other pamphlet. Where in other Worker pamphlets it says, “Explore how the Peace Corps can fit into your future,” the American Indian/Alaskan Native pamphlet instead reads, “Consider applying your experience and two- or four-year college degree toward a career and life-enhancing opportunity.” The narrative implications of this discursive choice are numerous.

Firstly, the inclusion of “two- or four-year college degree” instead of simply “degree” seems to emphasize two particular things: that a college degree is required, and that it can be only two-year in some cases. This is noteworthy, seeing as no other Worker pamphlet has degree requirements explicitly stated (outside of the general Peace Corps information page that is in every pamphlet). These emphases imply that the American Indian/Alaskan Native, unlike other (raced) Workers needs to be explicitly told that a degree is required, whereas others are assumed to have that understanding. In addition, the caveat that a two-year degree is also acceptable
represents American Indians and Alaskan Natives an undereducated, as opposed to the normative (white) volunteer, or even the other “exceptional” volunteers of color.

This is further reinforced by the phrasing, “Consider applying… toward a career.” The imperative form seems to denote that this is something American Indians/Alaskan Natives need to be told to consider, something that the normative (white) volunteer would already be thinking of. It assumes that the Native American/Alaskan Native wouldn’t conceive of applying his degrees to a career otherwise. Thus, the normal, white volunteer is (re)produced as one who has the good judgment to carefully consider her career.

In sum, this all implies that the Native American/Alaskan Native, in opposition to the ideal (white) volunteer, does not have the ambition to consider her career path without being told, and does not necessarily have the four-year college degree that the normal (white) volunteer does. Thus, the conflation of educated and career-driven with whiteness, and Native American/Alaskan Native with the lack of those characteristics, undergirds the construction of this pamphlet.

**An analysis of the Latino pamphlet.**

Of the four Worker pamphlets, I found the one designated for “Latinos” to be of particular interest. Unlike the other pamphlets of its type, this racial (or ethnic) group is not expressed as a type of “American” (as opposed to African American, American Indian, etc.). It seems to dissociate the Latino from an American identity. In fact, the Latino is narrated ubiquitously as in a constant state of immigration, having only just arrived in this country that is not (yet) his home.

This is especially obvious in the quotes chosen to grace the pages of this pamphlet. I want to be clear, foremost, that quotes from volunteers may not be entirely representative of
volunteers’ experiences, but are rather “filtered through Peace Corps logic” and “chosen as ‘appropriate’ by Peace Corps editors” (Polonijo-King, 2004) to provide a certain, designed narrative of (ethnic) experience. Thus, these quotes say more about what Peace Corps designates Latinos to be than what they declare themselves. I would like to focus on one specific quote, deemed important enough to fill an entire pamphlet segment. It is worth quoting at length:

When my daughter told me she wanted to join the Peace Corps—ouch!—she almost killed me. At the time, she was helping me pay the house bills. But then I started thinking that she would be helping my people, and she would see, with her own eyes, the scenes that I told my children about. The decision she made was right. Her experience in the Peace Corps has been very good for her.

It is notable that this is the only quote used in any of the pamphlets from the parent of a returned volunteer, rather than the volunteer herself. As the intended reader of this pamphlet is a prospective Latin(o/a) volunteer, the implication of this quote’s inclusion is that it will assuage fears the Latin(o/a) has of leaving his/her family for two years. The use of a parent reflects an perceived need for family approval in the Latin(o/a) home, a need which is not reflected in any of the other Work or Worker pamphlets. That this ovation to family approval is found in the Latino pamphlet alone implies that family approval is not something that the normative (white) worker needs to consider, and thus, not something that the normative American needs to consider.

The focus on family approval only in the Latino pamphlet implies a deviation from the norm: that of white independence. This, then, ties back into the lack of explicit recognition of the Latin(o/a)’s Americanness in the title of the pamphlet. The hegemonic ideal of Americans as (white and) independent is reinforced by separating the family-dependent Latino from the normative “American.” This separation is furthered by the mother’s use of the term “my people” in reference to those Host Country Nationals her daughter went to serve. Together these moves
serve to alienize the Latin(o/a) in a similar manner to the way Mexican immigrants were constructed in the 1930s (Flores, 2003), a discourse that underlies our rhetoric of immigration even today (Flores, 2003). Flores (2003) describes how immigration rhetoric in the 1930s “carefully constructed Mexicans as outside of the national body” (p. 373) and “generated a rhetorical border” (p. 378) between Mexican ‘aliens’ and ‘real’ Americans. In a similar manner, the Latin(o/a) here is presented as not truly American, but a perpetually just-arrived immigrant. Though subtle, this further renormalizes the ‘real’ American as white.

This quote also serves to equate the Latin(o/a) with low-class, which (re)normalizes middle-class whiteness. Here, the Latina volunteer is explicitly identified as necessary to financial well-being of her home, inscribing her as low-class. Again, a critical mind should interrogate why this was included only in the Latino pamphlet. I argue that it reveals white hegemony in the construction of these pamphlets, a hegemony that assumes all Latin(o/a)s to be impoverished. Again, this has a historical basis in rhetoric that positioned the Mexican as “the ideal immigrant workforce” (Flores, 2003, p. 369): docile and “willing to work hard for little money” (Flores, 2003, p. 370). Though clearly not all Americans with Latin roots are from Mexico, the pervasive language in society today of ‘illegal immigration’ serves to erase national boundaries, and create a monolithic representation of the Brown, Latino alien.

Thus, as the Latina is normalized as low-class, this implies that some sort of work is required to convince the Latina—or the family of the Latina—that it is okay to leave her family. It even implies that she must be convinced not only because of her close relational ties with her family, but also because of her family’s financial dependence on her income.

Lastly, it is important the note the genderings shown in this pamphlet. The quote is specifically feminine—it is the Latina, not the Latino, that is needed in the home—however, the
pamphlet itself is explicitly masculine—“An Exceptional Opportunity for Latinos.” Throughout the pamphlet, “Latino” is the only ethnic designation used, assuming the normativity of the masculine Latino experience as universal to all Latinos and Latinas. Of the quotes given, only one is that of a Latina volunteer. The rest are from Latino men, or the Latina’s mother, as shown above. The Latina is quoted as working with women and youth, while the Latinos are all quoted as having gained valuable career experience. This, coupled with the already implied necessity of the Latina woman in the home, reinforces masculine hegemony and perceived differences between “men’s” and “women’s” work in regard to the Latin(o/a).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

These Peace Corps recruitment pamphlets are truly fascinating and brimming with implicative narrations of varying intersections of identity, as well as neocolonial assumptions. The information that I have examined here is but a sampling of the many texts and images used to narrate who ‘the volunteer’ is allowed to be, under what circumstances, and in what relationship to the Host Country National. Many more things could be said, and there are certainly many things I’ve missed. However, even the small amount of material analyzed reveals the large implications of these narratives.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to discuss some of the racial and neocolonial implications of these narratives. Yet before I do, I must admit I have misgivings about leveling my critical ‘hammer’ against these texts. The fundamental goal of having pamphlets specific to certain racial groups is to increase the number of minority volunteers within Peace Corps, and thus foster a better understanding of the racial diversity of Americans on the part of Host Country Nationals. Though in some ways “American” is narrated as equivalent to “white” in the texts, the explicit goal of the same texts is to dismantle that association. It is therefore my hope
that revealing such ironies, and their colonizing implications, will help to create more equitable materials in the future.

Even work that seems to “highlight the best of human empathy and compassion” can have colonizing implications (Balaji, 2011, p. 50). The Peace Corps, though it attempts to represent both the humanity of its mission and the diversity of Americans in these pamphlets, ends up reinscribing both neocolonialism and whiteness. As Said (1993) argues, even ostensibly “positive” representations can reproduce colonial and racial power structures.

Thus, I’d like to examine one of the key arguments of this chapter: that the normative volunteer being white implies that the normative American is white. As volunteers are meant to be representative of America, by normalizing the white volunteer, the white American is also normalized. Obviously, this is unsettling simply as it is. However, it also has various racial-colonial ramifications. When this normalization is coupled with the Peace Corps’ goal of providing assistance to ‘developing’ countries, there is clear resonance with a narrative of the White Man’s Burden. Yet, the purpose of these pamphlets is to recruit volunteers of color into this same mission. Thus, the White Man’s Burden is disrupted and yet simultaneously reinforced by the inclusion of Americans of color in its project.

The White Man’s Burden presumes, first and foremost, that the entirety of the globe is the white man’s prerogative, as only he is burdened with the responsibility of taking care of it, because only he has the necessary knowledge, skills, and privilege to do so (Balaji, 2011; Cloud, 2004; Mohanty, 1991). Clearly, there are echoes of this in the Peace Corps pamphlets: that the white volunteer is considered privileged enough to choose to serve others, and that she has necessary skills that Host Country Nationals lack. However, by being offered this “exceptional opportunity”—however paternalistically—Americans of color are invited to take part in the
white man’s service to the more primitive, developing world. This reveals a contradiction in the narrative: from one side, it seems as if this burden of world service is primarily a raced ideology, and from another it seems to stem primarily from nation.

Thus, the narrative is disrupted slightly by these pamphlets, yet continues to stand as it is able to shift focus from race to nation if necessary to continue to hold power. This disruption reveals another significant facet of the narrative. Volunteers of color, as Americans, are recognized to be somehow different than other peoples of color in the world. The sheer fact that they are being recruited to take part in Peace Corps means that they are assumed to have something that people of developing countries, often implied or pictured as of color, cannot provide for themselves. As Shome (2010) recognizes, “domestic U.S. minorities, in relation of the larger global playing field of racial and political dominance, can themselves occupy privileged positions when seen transnationally” (pp. 151-152). Even the Latina perpetually just-arrived immigrant receives something from that recognition of (recent) arrival: she is now instilled with the ability to help her mother’s people—help her people.

Yet, at the same time, lines of privilege are also drawn across nations in terms of race (Balaji, 2011). Somehow, these narratives work to simultaneously accept and reject the volunteer of color as American, and continually re-code the ideological basis of the white man’s burden, switching between race or nation where the need arises. Whiteness is slippery, and may change form in order to hold power (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Omi & Winant, 1994). As other scholars have noted, “it is possible that even though someone is non-White he or she may gain access to White space and White privilege, and may even begin to identify with Whiteness until such time that he or she is reminded of his or her otherness” (Jackson & Moshin, 2010, p. 352).
This chapter focused on whiteness as an important complement to postcolonial theory (Alley-Young, 2008). In addition, it utilized an intersectional analysis in order both to avoid reinscribing other hegemonies (Moon & Flores, 2000) and detail a more nuanced narrative of interwoven dynamics of power. It also used a postcolonial lens to interrogate the neocolonial narratives within these materials, in response to invitations from various scholars in the field (Shome, 1996; Shome & Hegde, 2002; Prasad, A., 2003; Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007). As this chapter focused heavily on racial implications of Peace Corps recruitment materials and only was complemented by neocolonial implications, in the next chapter, I focus on the Americentric narrative told in a book of Peace Corps stories. In addition, I argue that American global hegemony can be destabilized by centering the intercultural relationship in narrative.
CHAPTER III

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING IN NARRATIVES OF “EFFECTIVE” SERVICE

Introduction

Recently, the politics of international aid and assistance have been a topic of public discussion, argument, and media spectacle. In the wake of the release of their video “KONY 2012” (Invisible Children, 2012), the nonprofit organization Invisible Children faced a barrage of responses. Solome Lemma, an Ethiopian writer, vehemently criticized the organization for creating a “dis-empowering and reductive narrative” that “reeks of the dated colonial views of Africa and Africans as helpless beings who need to be saved and civilized” (2012). A Nigerian-American novelist, Teju Cole, wrote a scathing series of tweets in response to the video that included the following:

1- From Sachs to Kristof to Invisible Children to TED, the fastest growth industry in the US is the White Savior Industrial Complex.
2- The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.
3- I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly. (2012)

In fact, a variety of sources—Ugandan (Izama, 2012; Kagumire, 2012; Ruge, 2012), Ethiopian (Lemma, 2012), and North American (Cole, 2012; Oyston, 2012)—were outraged at the video’s reliance on a narrative of the White Man’s Burden in order to advocate for U.S. military intervention in Uganda. The goal of KONY 2012 is for the U.S. government to send military advisors in order to assist the Ugandan government in capturing a renegade warlord. Respondents questioned the way in which Ugandans and Africans more broadly are represented by Americans—for an American audience—and the politics of such narrative constructions. As
Rosebell Kagumire, a Ugandan journalist, puts it, the video frames the situation as “one bad guy against good guys, and against we, the mighty West, trying to save Africa” (2012).

Invisible Children, however, is not the only international aid organization to have endured such media scrutiny and criticism in the past year-and-a-half. The United States Peace Corps celebrated its 50th anniversary last year under a heavy media gaze. As the organization was scheduled to have a Congressional hearing regarding what the Peace Corps has been doing over the past fifty years, one might expect media stories to explore the history of the Peace Corps and perhaps even level accusations of imperialism and neocolonialism similar to those that Invisible Children faced. This was not the case; rather, media attention and even the hearing itself were preoccupied with the safety of female volunteers from sexual assault in foreign countries (Hill & Kreider, 2011; Peace Corps at 50, 2011; Schechter, 2011a, 2011b). How is it that Peace Corps, a U.S. government organization that is currently active in seventy-nine countries throughout the world (Peace Corps, 2012b), receives much less scrutiny in its relationship to colonialism?

As an independent government organization that has sent over 200,000 American volunteers to serve in developing countries over the past fifty years (Peace Corps, 2012b), the Peace Corps merits attention from postcolonial rhetoric scholars. Since Shome’s (1996) call for postcolonial interventions in rhetoric, of the postcolonial rhetorical criticisms that followed many focused on historical situations (Black, 2007; Butler, 2002; Hasian, Jr.; 2002, Hasian 2010), rather than theorizing contemporary colonial power dynamics (Balaji, 2011; Parameswaran, 2002, 2004; Steyn, 2010). In addition, most criticized colonizing rhetoric without attending to postcolonial re-imaginings that lead to de-colonizing rhetoric. In one innovative piece, Chawla and Rodriguez (2011) used postcolonial criticism to reconstruct introductory communication
courses in a de-colonizing manner. I work from a similar premise: beginning with a rhetorical criticism of Peace Corps narratives of service, I discover counternarratives that disrupt Western hegemony, and I use these counternarratives to theorize decolonizing narratives of Peace Corps service. Ultimately, in this paper I argue that Americentric, imperialist narratives can be resisted and ruptured by centering the intercultural relationship.

Specifically, this paper critically examines the way that a Peace Corps published book of returned volunteer stories constructs narratives regarding knowledge and learning around both the Peace Corps volunteer and the Host Country National. A Life Inspired: Tales of Peace Corps Service (2008c) contains 28 stories written by Peace Corps volunteers. The volunteers represent a diverse group in terms of age, race, gender, country served, and time of service. This book is distributed by Peace Corps, and it may be requested for free from the organization’s website. Additionally, the books are distributed at recruitment events as tools to persuade prospective volunteers to apply to and join the organization. These narratives then work, in part, to construct expectations of future volunteers for what Peace Corps service ‘should’ be like and to influence the narration and enactment of Peace Corps service. This particular text is published by Peace Corps, and each of the 28 stories included was chosen from thousands of existent volunteer narratives (Peace Corps Journals, 2010). Thus, the themes throughout this collection can be taken to represent the institutionally approved narrative of Peace Corps

To begin, I situate the Peace Corps historically and describe the contested nature of Peace Corps narratives in public discourse. I then describe this project’s particular focus on the politics of knowledge and learning within these narratives, and I illustrate how this serves to construct a primary narrative of ‘effective service’ which ‘makes a difference.’ In the section that follows, I

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4 “Host Country National” is the preferred Peace Corps terminology for citizens of the country to which Peace Corps volunteers are sent.
analyze how Host Country National knowledge, Peace Corps volunteer knowledge, Host Country National learning and Peace Corps volunteer learning are narrated, bringing them together to describe effective service. I then turn to counternarratives in the book that contest the narrative of effective service, and close with the implications of centering the intercultural relationship on postcolonial theorizing.

**Neocolonialism, Narrative, and Peace Corps Discourse**

Since the Peace Corps’ inception, opinions have clashed over what it is the Peace Corps actually *does* and whether the Peace Corps should be considered a development organization or not (Bovard, 2011; Strauss, 2008; Tarnoff, 2008). The Peace Corps’ three official goals are:

1. Helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.
2. Helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.
3. Helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

However, according to development historians, the underlying reason for Peace Corps’ inception was to serve a diplomatic function in African countries—to win favor in the Cold War context over Russia (Amin, 1998; Amin, 1999; Hall, 2007). Narratives regarding Peace Corps experience draw from a rich, contested history of thought regarding the organization and its mission in the world, a history that has numerous colonial and imperial implications.

Americans, “having traditionally defined themselves in terms of ideals, were in desperate need of such an image at the time of the organization's establishment” (Hall, 2007, p. 53). The early years of Peace Corps are described as “a time when young people, full of idealism and eager to serve, volunteered by the tens of thousands to be of service to the poor of developing nations” (Hunter, 1982). To many people even today, “the Peace Corps symbolizes an ideal form of American altruism” (Hall, 2007, p. 53). The idea of young, innocent Americans,
sacrificing their health and wealth to live alongside the poorest of the poor for two years of their lives in order to serve resonates with many of the qualities that Americans hold dear: independence, pioneer spirit, and courage. Yet, to others, this scenario also conjures notions of arrogance and imperialism.

The Peace Corps has been referred to as “a missionary band out to save the world” (Brown as quoted in Landrum, 1978, p. A1), the “vanguard of cultural imperialism” (Brown as quoted in Landrum, 1978, p. A1), and “arrogant and colonialist in the same way as the government of which it is a part” (Peace Corps volunteers as quoted in Duiguid, 1967). In the first year of Peace Corps’ existence, students at Ibadan University in Nigeria found a postcard written by a Peace Corps volunteer that described Nigeria as a country of “squalor and absolutely primitive living,” prompting a Nigerian student to call the Peace Corps “a scheme designed to foster neo-colonialism” (“Postcard to Friend,” 1961).

These two polarized views of the organization beg a variety of questions: what the work of the Peace Corps actually is, who it is affecting, what standards that work is expected to meet in order to be considered “good” or “effective,” and what the colonizing implications are of such constructions. Sargent Shriver, the first Peace Corps director, was asked on its 25th anniversary if the Peace Corps benefits mostly the volunteer, the U.S., or the host country. He replied, “If you talk to the people going in, it’s for the benefit of the host country. If you talk to the people coming out, it’s for the benefit of the United States, or for themselves” (Shriver, 1986, p. 8). Interestingly, Shriver uses “people” to refer solely to volunteers in this statement; the idea of asking the Host Country National to whom the Peace Corps is of benefit does not occur to him. Instead, he paints the volunteer as not only the one who benefits from Peace Corps, but also as the one who is knowledgeable about the actuality of that experience. As I will show later in the
paper, narratives of knowledge—who has it, and who doesn’t—are quite political, and have neocolonial overtones.

Yet the question of who Peace Corps service is truly for is still quite contested. A recent returned volunteer agreed with Shriver, saying, “The reality was that I was the one who learned the most and got the most from the experience” (Clark, 2008). Others disagree, claiming that the greatest effect is on the Host Country Nationals that the Peace Corps serves, though perhaps not in the idealistic manner initially suggested above. They see the most important work of the Peace Corps as garnering support for America abroad by positively affecting the views of the people they serve (Rieffel, 2003), though they are uncertain if Peace Corps intends to make a “physical change or an attitude change” (Astrachan, 1967) in the people. Another opinion is that Peace Corps does indeed strive for development work, but “these young volunteers lack the maturity and professional experience to be effective development workers in the 21st century” (Strauss, 2008, emphasis in original). Thus, in public discourse surrounding the Peace Corps, there is no singular narrative of what effective volunteer service looks like and who it serves. Rather, a multiplicity of competing narratives exist. Scholars argue (Carlson, 1991; Flores, 2003) that a narrative that shifts the discourse slightly can gain strength in such a space. The book that I examine shifts the discourse regarding knowledge and learning in order to construct a particular narrative of effective service that serves to reinforce neocolonialism.

In this paper, I am taking a postcolonial perspective on how Peace Corps volunteers narrate effective service and am therefore “committed to exploring the power relations of the global and their frequent colonial operations as they inform micro and macro politics of power in different historical contexts” (Shome, 2010, p. 150). In this instance, the context is a specific book of returned volunteer stories. Each particular Peace Corps volunteer narrative serves as a
site of transnational contestation and negotiation. In the field, the volunteer exists in a hybrid space (Bhabha, 1994), which cannot easily be defined by traditional borders: the volunteer is neither fully American, nor truly part of the country in which she resides. Within this contested space, actors have the ability to “subvert and reappropriate dominant discourses” (Kraidy, 2002, pp. 319-320), though it may not always be realized. Upon return to the United States, the volunteer attempts to make sense of the liminal positionality (Anzaldúa, 1999) that she has experienced. These stories are an outgrowth of that sensemaking process, and thus may be understood as hybrid narratives. However, as Kraidy (2002) argues, hybridity is always articulated within hegemony and is thus vulnerable to appropriation for neocolonial ends.

Within the text at hand, the primary narrative that emerges is one of ‘effective service,’ positioned at different intersections of characters, knowledge, and learning, that reinforces dominant Western neocolonial ideologies and epistemologies. This positions the organization, as others have studied in different contexts (Parameswaran, 2004), as performing the role of ‘development’ without bringing into question the global power differentials upon which development work is based. However, two of the stories produce a counternarrative, which is not based on the efficacy of their service whatsoever. This counternarrative, I argue, springs from ruptures in the dominant narrative: situations where it no longer works as a sensemaking tool.

In any description of effective service, the volunteer has to make choices regarding the questions described above: what the goals are of the work, who the work is affecting, and how good work is measured. The act of “service,” whether done well or poorly, immediately implicates the Other—the service of a Peace Corps volunteer is constantly negotiated through and with the presence of Host Country Nationals. As soon as one names himself a volunteer, or
development worker, there are implications. As inventors of the negative (Burke, 1963), humans define themselves in opposition to Others, real or implied. “There is therefore a constant tension between the naming of the self and Other—it is always both inclusionary and exclusionary, comforting and hurtful, ideological and mundane” (Jackson & Moshin, 2010, p. 349). Analyzing the way Peace Corps volunteers narrate ‘effective service,’ I argue that through certain political representations of knowledge and learning, A Life Inspired: Tales of Peace Corps Service (Peace Corps, 2008c) constructs a dominant narrative which is both Americentric and neocolonial. Further, I aver that by constructing the intercultural relationship as ‘the center,’ rather than one culture or the other, American imperialism and neocolonialism can be disrupted and deconstructed. This has implications for postcolonial theorizing, since re-centering theory thus far has engaged with a multiplicity of mono-cultural centers (Asante, 1988, 1998, 2008; Miike, 2007, 2008, 2010; Ngũgĩ, 1986, 2012) rather than centering the intercultural.

As a postcolonial project, this paper seeks to theorize “the problematics of colonization and decolonization” (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 250). As postcolonialism is often contested (Prasad, A. 2003), with some scholars feeling a need to differentiate between the postcolonial and the anticolonial (Nkomo, 2011), and others assuming that the postcolonial is anticolonial (Shome, 1996), I fit within those that consider postcolonialism as an explicit commitment to “a radical critique of colonialism/imperialism and neocolonialism” (Prasad, A., 2003, p. 7).

Making a Difference: The Politics of Knowledge and Learning in Narratives of “Effective” Service

It was natural to wonder then how much of an impact we were making in the face of such widespread poverty. (Tschetter, N., 2008, p. 7)

There were times when I’d wonder what sort of an impact the Peace Corps and I were having on Moldova and my students. (Burns, 2008, p. 56)
I continually faced the question as to whether I was really making a difference. (Biedermann, 2008, p. 17)

I really would like to make a difference. (Hawkes, 2008, p. 69)

My work as a Volunteer\(^5\) helping unemployed women learn to start businesses was very fulfilling. I knew that I was making a difference in their lives (Schmidt, 2008, p. 102).

Throughout the book, volunteers found it “natural” to question whether or not their service was effective or successful, qualities that many volunteers saw as leading to ‘making a difference.’ This question is only ‘natural’ so far as the point of being a volunteer in another country is to somehow change or affect that country and its people. This Americentric viewpoint, rather than seeing Peace Corps as an opportunity for mutual learning (Tu, 2008) with a “changed mindset that addresses social development as a global joint venture” (Tu, 2008, p. 331), sees the experience in terms of the Americentric prerogative to assist “inferior Others requiring policing and rescue” (Cloud, 2004, p. 286).

In this section, I outline how successful service is described or measured in most stories in terms of learning and knowledge. As the Schmidt quote above exemplifies, many volunteer stories tie ‘making a difference’ to Host Country National learning. Though different narratives appear which construct learning and knowledge in a variety of manners, there are some underlying consistencies which lead to a primary narrative of effective service. These consistencies are based on an underlying Americentric ontology and epistemology in which “to be non-Western…is ontologically thus to be unfortunate in nearly every way” (Said, 1993, p. 304). The “commonest sequence” of America as “a force for good in the world” (Said, 1993, p.

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\(^5\) The word volunteer is capitalized as a matter of course throughout *A Life Inspired: Tales of Peace Corps Service*. However, I choose in my own writing not to capitalize volunteer, and only to capitalize Host Country National. In the same manner as races are often represented in critical studies, I purposefully do not capitalize the positionality considered to hold the most power, and instead capitalize the subaltern, symbolizing the emancipatory goals of this work.
is intricately laced into American cultural narratives. Cultural narratives are necessarily co-implicated in and co-constructive of imperialism (Said, 1993); therefore, cultural narratives and Peace Corps narratives are interwoven in a complex relationship. Here, I explore the politics of knowledge and learning in this narrative: who has knowledge, and of what kind, and who can learn, and in what way.

Before I continue, I should note that the way that I have been using ‘Host Country National’ as the term to represent people of many different nationalities, cultures, and races is not meant to render these groups and peoples as a monolithic ‘Third World’ or ‘developing world’ entity, nor to minimize the importance of their differences. Rather, I am interested in making the threads that the volunteer narratives have created between them explicit. The ‘Host Country National’ term in this paper, then, does not reflect on an actual body of people so much as on consistent paternalistic representations of a body of people as constructed through narrative.

Host Country National Knowledge

Host Country National knowledge is presented in different ways throughout the stories in the book. However, there two themes that run through a variety of stories: the representation of Host Country National knowledge as nonexistent, and the delegitimization of the knowledge that Host Country Nationals claim to have. One volunteer performs both of these functions in narrating her work in Zambia:

When I went one Wednesday to visit this women’s group, they proudly informed me that they already had business training. Then I found out this ‘business training’ consisted only of learning how to fill out a record sheet and monitor time worked. When I asked about a business plan and a group constitution, there was no reply. So we started from the beginning… (Saltzman, 2008, p. 80)
The scare quotes around the phrase ‘business training’ coupled with the description of their scant learning—“only” knowing to fill out a record sheet—reveal Saltzman’s dismissal of what the Host Country National women claim to know. The Host Country National women as infantilized here; though they claim to have had training in business, Saltzman dismisses their knowledge as lower-level, as not enough even to get a business started. In fact, she extends this further in the next sentence: even past their childish belief that their knowledge of filling out a record sheet is worthwhile, they don’t know at all even the basics of business planning. One can almost hear the exasperated sigh emanating from Saltzman as she attempts to patiently instruct them, as a teacher to her students. This infantilization of the Host Country National is a colonizing and imperialistic ideology (Said, 1978). It creates a necessity for (white) American domination over the international Other (of color) under the guise of paternalistic necessity. These women needed Saltzman’s business training, because their own knowledge was so pitiful. This serves to “reaffirm a discursive adult-child relationship between whites and Others” (Balaji, 2011, p. 52), and center American knowledge and assistance as absolutely necessary.

In the way this excerpt is related, the Host Country National women are represented as childlike, presenting a dandelion to Saltzman (2008) and “proudly” proclaiming it to be a flower. When they are told it’s actually a weed, they are disciplined into acceptable terms and definitions. Another volunteer also describes the women that she worked with in a similar manner, dismissing Host Country Nationals’ questions in a way that presents them as simplistically missing the point.

Schmidt’s story is also about teaching a class on business planning. She says, “I wanted to make the concept easy to understand so I decided to use the metaphor of a ‘road trip.’ In a mixture of Russian and English, I bravely began…” (2008, p. 101). However, her students
protested, asking, “‘How can you plan your trip this way? …It is better not to plan so much since you can’t control the future. It is better just to set off when the time is right’” (p. 101). Schmidt concludes with the comment, “I never did manage to convince most of the women I worked with that planning was a good idea,” (p. 101).

The idea of making it “easy to understand” implies that it could be difficult for the women to grasp, that they are not advanced or intelligent enough to understand the complexities right away, and supports the same childlike representation that we examined above. In addition, by ending with a focus on her failure to convince them, Schmidt seems not to have really listened to their view on the act of planning. Even though she does admit that “they had experienced a life so different than mine…a life that had a whole different set of ‘rules’ for survival” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 101), she still is set on convincing them of what she knows is a good idea: the act of planning. Thus, even though the comment ostensibly accepts their knowledge that planning is irrelevant because you cannot know the future, her continued focus on convincing them that planning is important implies that her knowledge and life experience are somehow more true than theirs, more valuable.

This is indicative of “America’s arrogance as a teaching civilization” (Tu, 2008, p. 332); a cultural assumption that implies that other nations do not have the same value of knowledge, and therefore must be taught. Here, the American life experience (and, a particular kind of American life experience) is centered and normalized. Anything which deviates from that requires fixing. This mission is quite similar to that of Western feminists in their condemnation of ‘Third World’ patriarchy (Mohanty, 1991)—though it may be taken on with good intention, as a form of ‘assistance’ or ‘aid’ to those in need—it is stil imperialist.
It is ironic that both of these volunteers speak about how their own ‘planning’ went awry. “As a Volunteer, I came to learn that you can plan and plan and sometimes things would work out accordingly, but more often than not, you just had to be flexible,” (p. 82) says Saltzman, the same volunteer who was shocked that the Host Country National women she worked with did not have a business plan. Similarly, Schmidt speaks of how she “had always believed that [she] had all the time in the world” (p. 99) to join the Peace Corps and ended up spontaneously deciding—twice—that she wanted to apply, rather like the Host Country National women’s suggestion that road trips should be unplanned. The same Host Country National ideas on planning that are dismissed earlier arise in the volunteers’ stories themselves, although in different parts of life, separate from business. Therefore, it is not the knowledge itself—the idea of not planning, staying open, and being flexible—that the volunteers dismiss or delegitimize in their narratives, but the connection of the knowledge to the Host Country Nationals and the area in which it is deployed.

The time and place for planning is based on the centrality of American culture; there is no admission that other possibilities for the place of planning exist. The American way of bounding planning is universalized as the only appropriate way. This construction “dictate[s]” and “obscure[s]…the realities of empire” while also “insist[ing] on American innocence” (Said, 1993, p. 8). For some reason, going into business without a plan is viewed as impractical, but spontaneous life decisions are viewed as an adventure. By reinforcing and universalizing American cultural values in this manner, the narrative also serves an imperialistic function (Said, 1993).

**Peace Corps Volunteer Knowledge**
Peace Corps volunteers are sent to countries to perform specific jobs, which require certain skills or training. Therefore, it makes sense that volunteers, in their personal narratives, would represent themselves as having technical knowledge. Among the types of knowledge volunteers claim to have are: skills with the English language (pp. 12, 52, 56, 119, 130), engineering (p. 25), agriculture (pp. 41, 96), information technology (p. 69), and business (pp. 80, 101). However, in these stories, volunteers sometimes reveal that they don’t actually have the skills that they should have to be performing the jobs that they were assigned. Biedermann (2008), for example, admits that he had “no prior formal teaching experience, but a lifelong passion for mathematics, and a growing heart toward service” (p. 17).

In many of the narratives, abstract qualities such as passion, ingenuity, and persistence are presented as viable alternatives to having technical skills in enacting their jobs. It is important to note that Host Country Nationals are rarely given this same presentation. Biedermann, quoted above, implies that his heart and passion were enough to make him successful as a teacher, though he did not have the proper training. Daniel presents herself in a similar situation:

I’ve taught basic HIV lessons in seven schools so far. I’m quicker on my feet than I’ve any right to be—given the shortness of time in this role—in fielding questions from kids, many of whom want nothing more than to embarrass the mzungu who has come to talk to them about sex, death, life, and disease. It’s impossible to be self-conscious in these moments, so absurd are the scenarios, so surreal the situations (2008, p. 47).

Daniel gives no indication of any HIV/AIDS education training previous to her arrival as a volunteer in Kenya and implies that those seven lessons that she’s taught so far are the extent of her AIDS education experience. Yet, her speed in coming up with answers to questions is what allows her to perform her task well – or well enough. The cultural assumption that America is a “teaching civilization” (Tu, 2008, p. 329) and “bound to lead,” (Said, 1993, p. xvii) forces Daniel
to take on responsibility that she does not have the requisite skills for. Daniel, then, reinforces Americentrism not only by assuming that she must take on this work, but also by narrating herself as successful when by all rights she shouldn’t have been.

Daniel’s description of her teaching moments as absurd and surreal stands out and also has interesting implications. As she changes subject at the end of this statement in the actual text, the absurd and surreal scenarios that she mentions must be part of the questions that the children ask, or the teaching of children themselves. What is it that makes this classroom experience absurd? And in comparison to what as ‘logical’ and ‘real?’ Again, Daniel reasserts Americentrism by implying that the space Host Country National children exist in is absurd. This description of absurdity constructs its opposite in a Orientalist manner (Said, 1978)—the logical and real space of American experience. In a manner similar to the business planning examples above, this serves to delegitimize Host Country National knowledge and experience.

The way in which Daniel manages to escape detection regarding her lack of technical skill also has another implication in the way Host Country Nationals are represented: they are described as not knowing enough to realize that volunteers sometimes don’t know things, either. In these narratives told by volunteers, they portray the Host Country Nationals as usually assuming the volunteer knows what he is doing, and would be very surprised to find out that he didn’t.

Daniel portrays a group of Kenyan students as being unable to accept that she does not know how to medically care for people suffering from HIV/AIDS.

The group believes I know more than they do about providing care for AIDS patients. I do not, and have not been able to get them to understand this. They will turn to me for guidance and reassurance throughout the day. (Daniel, 2008, p. 46)
She portrays herself as having attempted to convince them that she doesn’t know anything about medical care for AIDS, but they will not believe her. The students cannot accept the knowledge that the American does not know. Another volunteer, serving in South America, is at a meeting where the idea of planting a fruit tree garden is brought up. He narrates, “I promised the women we would have fruit trees. I didn’t know how we would make this happen, but a renewed sense of purpose rushed over me, and I decided to worry about the details later” (Welch, p. 33).

In both of these passages, the American is portrayed as an assumed superhero, ironically able to accomplish anything if he or she really tries, regardless of not having the necessary knowledge or skill. In addition, the Host Country Nationals are shown as needing the American. In McKinnon’s (2011) piece on political asylum in the United States, she demonstrates how rhetoric surrounding asylum cases is negotiated to create distance between the U.S. and the nation being fled. This rhetorical distance allows for the construction of the U.S. as saving women from backward, patriarchal nations, without calling the U.S.’s own gender inequities to account. Similarly, here there is a constructed distance between U.S. knowledge (read: modern) and Host Country National knowledge (read: backward) that allows for the construction of the American volunteer as the hero. As Said puts it, “the rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence in an imperial setting” (1993, p. ivii). In Daniel’s story, the Host Country Nationals will not believe that she doesn’t know what she’s doing, because they need her for “guidance” and “reassurance,” things which she provides, even in her own ignorance. In Welch’s story, he is the one who promises that the women will have fruit trees. Though it was their idea to start the garden, he is portrayed as the catalyzing force that actually has the ability to make the garden happen.
It is important here not to forget who it is that is reading this narrative of Americans into the thoughts of Host Country Nationals. These narratives are based on actual life interactions with Host Country Nationals, however they are, to some extent, projections of what Host Country Nationals must have been thinking, made by Americans. The belief of Host Country Nationals, as presented in these stories, that Americans know what they’re doing allows for two things: responsibility for the act gets shifted onto the Host Country National, and it shows all the more how smart and skilled the American is when they are able to make the task happen successfully without the ‘necessary’ technical training.

Daniel (2008) gives a nice example of the responsibility being shifted onto the Host Country Nationals: she tried to explain to them that she didn’t know how to care for AIDS patients, and they wouldn’t listen. Thus, it offers a narrative escape from responsibility: she told them what she could, and they still wanted her to do it. In some ways, this mirrors colonial discourses of countries asking to be ruled. European colonialists narrated their tales of subjugation of the Oriental Other by explaining that the Orientals didn’t have what was needed to rule themselves and that they were asking to be ruled (Said, 1978). One especially disturbing passage in the book makes this logic almost explicit in its description of Morocco. The author writes

Morocco is a country to be explored—as if by design. The number of hidden corners; the amount of diversity; the culture of hospitality and community; and the strong, continually changing landscape all desire to be discovered and studied. (Jones, 2008, p. 75)

Jones describes Morocco as a country designed with curious people like Americans in mind. He expresses that the country was clearly made to be “discovered and studied.” The Americentrism of these narratives is clearly exemplified here. The country is assumed to have been constructed for the benefit of explorers, rather than its own people. The people of Morocco are not described
at all—they are assumed to be unimportant. From an Americentric viewpoint, what really matters about Morocco is its benefit to the international explorer. In a similar manner to the discourses above, Jones deflects responsibility for his explorations and adventures onto the country of Morocco and its people. It was their choice to design the country this way, and he cannot help but discover the hidden treasures, just as Daniel and Welch cannot help but assist the Host Country Nationals who need them. This mindset is imperialistic, as it recognizes the value only of American benefit, knowledge, and reality.

**Teaching the Host Country National**

The possession of knowledge is not the only political representation involved in the narrative of effective service and making a difference; the ability to teach and learn new knowledge is also politically charged. Thus, I turn to examining under what conditions the Host Country National is able to learn—and under what conditions he is not—in Peace Corps volunteer narratives. I start with stories where the Host Country National does not learn (from the volunteer).

One apparently lighthearted story begins with a youth running a football into the wrong goal at a game. The volunteer relates, “A bit frustrated, but laughing at the same time, I decided that American football was too difficult to explain and adapted the rules a bit.” (Huffman, 2008, p.11). This statement, though seemingly innocuous, holds a hidden paternalism. The people that he is teaching to play football are between the ages of nine and twenty years old (p. 11). However, in his description, the difficulty in teaching the sport lies not on the age of the people being taught or of the young adult who made the mistake (we are not told his age), but in American football itself. The sport is what is too difficult; we are left to fill in the blank of “for whom?” With the emphasis on the American-ness of the sport, though in part differentiating it
from soccer, it leaves the impression that someone’s nationality is what determines the aptitude to learning the sport, and that Host Country Nationals are not up to the task.

Paternalism is found in other passages as well, though it is presented in a different manner. Rather than the belief presented above that some concepts are too difficult for their (simplistic) minds to learn, there is disbelief: how could they not understand what is truly happening? One volunteer, working with a health clinic, describes, “Not everyone took the medicine we gave them since many didn’t believe it would cure them. The word for smallpox in their language translated to ‘God’s will,’ and most of the nomadic community believed that to be true” (Tschetter, R., 2008, p. 6). Here, the Host Country Nationals are portrayed as almost absurd, refusing to take medicine that will save their lives. Another volunteer also presents the absurdity of Host Country National refusal to learn: “AIDS was making its own inexorable march across my village of over 3,000 families, snatching someone away almost weekly. And while AIDS was talked about, few people accepted its existence among them” (Arrington, 2008, p. 21).

These narrative constructions of nonsensical Host Country Nationals fit with the dismissal and delegitimizing of Host Country National knowledge described earlier; their epistemologies are dismissed in Western ways of knowing and cannot be made sense of in the volunteer’s narrative of effective service. These stand out as instances where the volunteer was unable to ‘make a difference,’ where the volunteer was unable to help the Host Country Nationals learn something they needed to know. As I will describe later in this paper, there are alternative narrations that allow volunteers to construct their service as ‘effective.’

Yet, there are also many instances where volunteers are able to teach Host Country Nationals. For example, Davis-Collins (2008) describes the culmination of her work with a
Honduran family. In Davis-Collins’ story, she describes visiting Don José and Doña Maria’s house to work in the garden over the period of six months, and how throughout her visits, she notices that Doña Maria undergoes a “transformation” (p. 43) from “bitter” and “emotionally numb” (p. 43) to happy and laughing. She concludes her story with the following passage:

“You know,” he [Don José] said thoughtfully. “I’m really glad you’ve been helping Maria. Because of you I have realized that women can learn things too.”

My first reaction as an educated woman was to laugh because I was sure that he was joking. But when I looked at his face, I saw that he was serious. And the stark realization for me was that this was a totally new insight for Don José. After I was able to close my gaping jaw, I met his smile with one of my own. In the background I could hear Doña Maria laughing. (pp. 43-44)

Davis-Collins’ initial reaction of laughter emphasizes how absurd she finds it that someone could actually believe that women cannot learn. However, rather than getting angry, upset, or concerned, she seems pleased that he has learned this, as she meets his smile. The construction of his statement also places the credit squarely on her for “helping Maria” and locates her as the cause of his change of mind. She, the American, assists Don José, the Host Country National, to expand his thinking into territories that, though uncharted for the Host Country National, are extremely obvious to the American.

In a similar representation of mental stretching, Biedermann (2008) relates that his Peace Corps students “write [him] e-mails today as they continue their studies at universities in other countries and thank [him] for challenging them to go further, to think beyond borders” (p. 18). Biedermann narrates how his Host Country National students recognize him as the factor that pushed them outside their limited boundaries. Both of these examples use a ‘native informant’ (Kapoor, 2008) in order to legitimize that the American should be getting credit. The focus, as well, is on American knowledge. Host Country National ways of knowing are presented as bounded, yet neither Biedermann nor Davis-Collins (2008) is presented as having the boundaries
of their knowledge pushed (unless it is in reference to Davis-Collins surprise at how little Don José knows). Biedermann and Davis-Collins are able to speak of their achievements in stretching Host Country National knowledge only through Americentrism: their knowledge is not bounded, but universal (Tu, 2008). The Host Country National’s knowledge is bounded. However, whether or not the Host Country National learns from the Peace Corps volunteer in their narratives, volunteers are still able to fit their stories into the primary narrative of effective service and making a difference. In the next section, I explore how this is accomplished.

**Effective Service and Integration of the American**

When Host Country Nationals learn, it often goes hand in hand with volunteers finding their service to be ‘effective’ or ‘sustainable.’ In order to narrate their service as effective, meaningful or sustainable, the volunteer often focuses on Host Country National learning, an easy way to show how the volunteer made a discernible difference. However, sometimes volunteers find their service to be effective, meaningful, and sustainable when there has not been demonstrated learning. In these narratives, the service is described as effective or meaningful because the volunteer has been integrated into the community. The volunteer is now considered a family member or an important friend to Host Country Nationals in the community. The connection between the two ways of constructing effective service is that there is a cultural integration of something American: whether that be American knowledge, or the American volunteer him or herself.

Sustainability—and being effective—seems to be more about the American way being accepted and integrated into the community than the volunteer having assisted a community-based project along. In one story, a volunteer talks about the Host Country National counterpart he worked with, named Khalid. They worked together so well that “Khalid had also become
known by the Peace Corps staff in Morocco due to his strong involvement in *my* community” (Huffman, 2008, p. 13, emphasis mine). The ownership of the community is centered around Huffman, the American volunteer, and it is thus rendered an accomplishment for Khalid to be active in his *own* community. In addition, Huffman admits that he “often had to nudge him [Khalid] to the front of the room” (2008, p. 14) in order for him to take credit for organizing community events. As Huffman relates it, this is the hallmark of sustainability—

> “I never would have done these things if it hadn’t been for you,” Khalid said during my last week in Morocco, bringing a lump to my throat as I realized the sustainability my program managers had emphasized so much had come to fruition. (p. 14)

Huffman himself is the sustainability of the project. Sustainability, in this way, can’t happen without the American component. It’s centered around the American component. Khalid expresses the he could not have been involved in his community without Huffman, and it is this expression that Huffman reads as marking his service sustainable. Even in stories that completely occur within the physical space of another nation, they are American stories. These stories reinforce Americentrism by painting sustainable work as impossible without America.

Another volunteer returns to Guatemala ten years after her Peace Corps experience to find that her woodburning stove project has been both effective and sustainable: everyone in the village is still using the stoves she built. “I knew then that my service counted. I felt proud and satisfied” (Resendes, 2008, p. 117). Her service counts because her knowledge and work has been integrated into the community. However, she also tags on, “These feelings did not come from the stove project or any work I had done during my service, but because the community accepted me into its heart” (p. 117). There is a slippage here between accepting American knowledge and accepting the American person: the way that she knows she has been accepted into their hearts is through their continued use of her work.
Other volunteers also feel their experience is meaningful and effective because of this membership in a new community: “After completing my two years of service, I feel I am now a citizen of two countries, one that I was born into, and another of which I chose to give two years of my life” (Biedermann, 2008, p. 18). More drastically, Blyden states

There were certainly days in Mongolia when I was ready to go home, but I now know I would do it again in a minute. The turning point was when I was taken out of the context of just being a Peace Corps Volunteer living in Mongolia. The point where someone would see me on the street and simply address me as ‘brother.’ I knew I had become a member of the family. (2008, p. 54)

In this way, the volunteer himself stands in for a ‘project’ or work that the Host Country Nationals keep going after the volunteer who started it has left: the volunteer is the project. Service counts here when something American—whether it is knowledge or the actual American person—can be narrated as having been integrated into the community or culture. When a volunteer has been ‘integrated,’ ‘accepted,’ or is now ‘like family,’ they have been adopted into the Host Country community. Something American has found its way into the minds and hearts of the people.

Throughout this section, the way in which volunteer stories narrated their experiences with the Host Country National reinforced an imperialistic Americentrism. Though these stories are ostensibly about the Host Country, in reality they are meant to center America, American knowledge, and American experience in such a way as to necessitate subordinating the Host Country National. Said (1993) claims, “No American has been immune to this structure of feeling” (p. xvii). The narratives of exceptionalism and dominance are an intricate part of American culture. In this next section, I address the way in which the American learning from the Host Country National is described (or not). Though, hegemonically, “The West…has not felt compelled to learn from the rest of the global community” (Tu, 2008, p. 332), Peace Corps
volunteers often speak of how much they learned from their experience. Following, I describe how this tension is negotiated.

**Learning From the Host Country National?**

Volunteers also often speak of how much they learned from their experience. However, it is usually described in a manner very different than the one outlined above for Host Country National learning and integration of the American. American volunteers do not integrate the Host Country into their learning or culture, but rather are represented as learning larger, *universal* lessons from their experiences.

In an example of explicit refusal to integrate the Host Country National, Ousler (2008) describes in extreme detail everything that her village gave her when she left—

> There were 450 pounds of hand-shelled corn, 200 pounds of wheat, 48 handmade woven baskets, 15 large, woven mats, 7 woven handbags, 3 guinea pigs, 7 chickens, 27 eggs, 10 traditional Tanzanian *kangas* (skirts), and many African carvings… Everything but a partridge in a pear tree! (p. 98)

—and then how she refused to take most of it home. “Much of this, of course, I left for the village to use. Some items I shipped home to incorporate when sharing my stories about Tanzania” (p. 98). Ousler refused to take home gifts from her village—after listing them carefully—because she didn’t *need* them; she didn’t need anything from Host Country Nationals. Ousler’s comment that “of course” she left most for the village to use implies that the village implies that the material outweighs the sentiment. As material objects, the impoverished village could use them more than she, the privileged American could. The only things Peace Corps volunteers want from the Host Country National are abstract in form: life lessons.

Peace Corps volunteers describe themselves as integrating abstract lessons, which are learned more from observing Host Country Nationals suffering through difficult circumstances than necessarily from the Host Country Nationals themselves. Arrington (2008), speaking of
what she learned from Angel, a South African woman dying of AIDS, said “She taught me strength and survival and love. She taught me how to live” (p. 23). After describing the Burkinabe’s “substandards of living”, Chambre (2008) claims, “But what I have learned is that, despite all of this, the Burkinabe are not so different from us” (p. 68, emphasis mine), and that she achieved “cultural understanding” (p. 68). After living with orphans, Luongo (2008) said, “I’ve learned to love in a way more profound than I’ve ever known before” (p. 127).

Other volunteers claim to have learned “lessons in patience,” “lessons in humility,” and “perhaps the hardest lessons, the ones in gratitude and compassion” (Simun, 2008, p. 130). They have also learned that “everyone wants to be respected” (Blyden, 2008, p. 53), and “flexibility is a necessary attribute for any prospective volunteer” (Biedermann, 2008, p. 16). Thus, though the volunteer is constantly learning, she is not being taught by the Host Country National. Since Host Country National knowledge is often dismissed or undervalued, the volunteer narrates herself as learning highly abstract lessons through their Peace Corps experience. Thus, she manages to avoid the contradiction involved between volunteer learning and dismissal of Host Country National knowledge.

Further, the narrative is constructed that Peace Corps volunteers, through these abstract lessons, experience “real” life—a life that they are lucky to be sheltered from in America. When Schmidt (2008) describes why, after getting hit by a car, she thought about joining the Peace Corps, she says, “Then and now, the Peace Corps represented to me the chance to make a positive difference in the world, to give back a little for the advantages I had enjoyed simply by born an American” (p. 100). This statement seems to imply that there is a general privilege that all Americans, regardless of race, class, or gender, share. Other volunteers invoke similar logic, saying, “We learned to appreciate what we have as Americans, and how as global citizens we
have a responsibility to others who are less fortunate” (Tschetter, N., 2008, p. 7), and “Burkina Faso is a terribly impoverished country and the substandards of living particularly en brousse (in the bush), are something that we as Americans could never fully understand” (Chambre, 2008, p. 68).

Across all these statements, the underlying assumptions are that: first, all Americans regardless of race, class, or gender are similarly privileged; second, that extreme poverty does not exist in America; and finally that we have a responsibility to help alleviate suffering in those places that do suffer, namely, other, ‘developing’ countries. These abstract lessons that volunteers are learning, then, spring from using their privilege as Americans to volunteer in the Peace Corps, and learn how to suffer like the “other” people do. Thus, the narrative throughout these stories is not only Americentric, but positions a certain raced and classed understanding of America as center.

American life, in this narrative, is held as boring and ordinary. One volunteer describes a return to America as “a return to the comforts of an ordinary life” (Biedermann, 2008, p. 15). Another volunteer described the United States as a place where “life seemed pale and not so interesting” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 102). In comparison, life in the impoverished developing world is “zany, crazy, and altogether interesting” (Simun, 2008, p. 129). As Luongo (2008) describes it, “These last two years haven’t been about work at all; they’ve been about life, in all its depths, full of laughter and tears” (p. 128). Life, in all its depths, is portrayed as existing somewhere outside of America. These are the lessons that Peace Corps volunteers learn when their service is effective and meaningful: lessons on life that they could not find in the sanitized version we are described as living in the United States.

**Counternarratives: Shifting Temporality**
As I have shown, most stories in the book use portrayals of learning and knowledge to relate to a narrative of effective service which makes a difference. They are able to narrate their service as ‘making a difference’ through the way in which Host Country Nationals learn from volunteers, or integrate the volunteers into their communities as new members. Either way, something American—whether knowledge or the volunteer herself—is integrated into the Host Country National community. Peace Corps volunteers, however, balk at integrating the Host Country National, and rather look for ‘life lessons’ that they can extract from their experience.

However, a few stories serve as counternarratives. In fact, they do not focus on effective service or making a difference at all. In this section, I explore the manner in which these stories are constructed in order to produce a counternarrative, and what enabled them to subvert the primary narrative of effective service. I argue that by centering the intercultural relationship, these counternarratives destabilize Americentrism and imperialism. I focus on two stories in detail: “Itam” (Fearnside, 2008) and “Leave Taking” (Genovese, 2008).

**Temporality**

Two stories do not resonate with these themes the way that most of the stories in the book do. They are set up differently in terms of scene and temporality, and they do not follow the same form as the others. Because of the centering of ‘effective service’ and the American, most of the other stories told are an overview of a Peace Corps volunteer’s journey: from the United States, to the country they serve in, and home again. This chronology basically dictates that the subject of the story will be the volunteer, as no one else (unless a spouse) accompanies a volunteer on all legs of this journey. Fearnside (2008) and Genovese (2008), however, chose to situate their tales within a shorter time range: Fearnside uses the two-and-a-half months of in-country training, and Genovese uses a single afternoon, with follow-up reflection on that
afternoon. Even within Fearnside’s two and half month span, he focuses on singular events and moments, describing them in detail, with no specific plot function moving him from one to the next. He simply describes moments he remembers in detail. This allows them to focus on characters other than themselves.

Both of these authors also use thick description (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) a tool which is not utilized by the others. Take the following paragraph as an example:

Clouds of dust rose into the sky, the sun fell toward the horizon, and the nearby mountains faded into a hazy blue and then an indistinct shadow. It was dark when we rode back down the road toward home. I felt bad for the poor sheep lying next to me, but I felt good knowing that we were taking part in a cycle of life that had been played out for centuries here – knowing that Malik and Adik would be able to continue studying English, that Takmina would gain a marketable skill in learning to cut and style hair before eventually going to university as well. (Fearnside, 2008, p. 85)

The detail of the description in this paragraph far surpasses that of any of the other stories. The attention to surroundings outside of the volunteer here also seems to fit with the larger scope of the passage: rather than focusing on a single person’s story of how they became a volunteer and what they did, this opens the scope up to cycles “played out for centuries.” Fearnside realizes the volunteer is not always in the picture, nor should they be.

Characterization

The characters themselves are also described in this detailed manner. Itam “always spoke slowly and clearly” (Fearnside, 2008, p. 83), though he also “boomed” (p. 84). His “light green eyes laugh[ed]” (p. 84) and he “enjoyed vodka”, though “moderately” (p. 84). He “made a special effort” (p. 84) to include Fearnside in his family. He was a veterinarian. Cata

…and had 10 children and, like most Ngobe women, she was short and thick. She wore her long black hair pulled tightly into a braided ponytail. She had never cut her hair; doing so was considered bad luck. She had wise, sad eyes buried by a heavy, round face. Her unusually strong personality and sharp tongue were softened only slightly by her smile. (Genovese, 2008, p. 89)
These descriptions help the reader to visualize the main characters of the story. Few of the other stories refer to Host Country Nationals by name, and none of them give much of a description of the people named beyond “a beautiful smile” (Burns, 2008, p. 55) or the bitterness of Doña Maria (Davis-Collins, 2008).

In addition, the only authors who describes themselves at all are Blyden (2008) and Arrington (2008), who both announce that they are Black. As most authors feature themselves as headline characters in their own stories, this is an interesting omission. To some extent, it speaks to the invisibility of whiteness (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Shome, 2000). White authors do not feel the need to describe themselves, as white bodies are assumed to be normative.

Cata and Itam, perhaps because they are the only characters described in detail, are also represented as knowledgeable and competent, as opposed to the primary representation of Host Country Nationals. For example, when Genovese (2008) has to tell Cata that she cannot help her son, she does so by “employing humor, a form of communication that [they] were both comfortable with” (p. 91), implicitly acknowledging that Cata would understand the meaning behind the joke. After running through complexities in her head, she states, “But I didn’t have to explain this to Cata” (p. 92). The implication is that Cata already knew, and could work through all the same complexities on her own. Fearnside (2008), in addition, was impressed Itam’s skill as a veterinarian. “I would watch as he peered into cows’ eyes, administered shots, and rubbed ointment onto their sores” (p.84).

Moments of Rupture

Ultimately, these stories interrupt the primary narrative because something has happened in the story that ruptures the primary narrative’s use as a sensemaking tool. Both Fearnside (2008) and Genovese (2008) face a situation that reveals their own lack of power. Both authors
are attempting to deal with situations in their stories to which they do not have answers, and can do nothing to make it better. The day after leaving his homestay family, with whom he has lived for two months, Fearnside finds out that his homestay father died of heart problems.

Genovese is asked to take her friend Cata’s son Iscar, who is deaf, back to the United States with her. Though he is twelve years old, he does not move beyond second grade, even though he is “intelligent” (2008, p. 91), because “the second grade teacher…was the only teacher in the school patient enough to find new ways to teach him” (p. 90). Cata tells Genovese that “he will never learn more than what he knows now, and he will have no opportunities” (p. 91) if he stays in Panama. Genovese, concerned with her own financial instability and unconfirmed future, was uncertain whether she could provide for Iscar, and she also “wasn’t sure sure that removing him from his home, his family, and his culture was truly a solution” (pp. 91-92). Rather than give an idea of what should be done, she states, “My experience in the Peace Corps had taught me that even some of the most straightforward challenges are, paradoxically, complex” (p. 92).

Fearnside cannot do anything, and Genovese does not know what to do, or if she should do anything at all, and allows the complexity to sit. These stories therefore cannot focus, as the others, on what was done to make their service sustainable, on what was taught or learned. For what can be learned from a situation that doesn’t make sense? Fearnside doesn’t try to rationalize Itam’s death, and Genovese doesn’t try to rationalize her decision. In fact, neither of those two stories even mentions what work the volunteers were there to do, beyond one sentence in *Itam*. The narratives here, rather than telling the story of a service, tell the story of relationships – Genovese’s with Cata, and Fearnside’s with Itam.
The centering of the intercultural relationship in these stories allows for the de-centering of American hegemony. Both the American and Host Country National occupy the center simultaneously through the hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) constructed by the liminal positionality of the volunteer (Anzaldúa, 1999). The center-as-hybrid requires the narrator to face questions regarding American exceptionalism in ability, knowledge, and progress, and realize the value of multiple modernities (Bhabha, 1994).

**Conclusion**

I believe that the most important thing we do as Volunteers is provide hope. Everything else seems like an ancillary detail. This sounds so easy doesn’t it? That’s because we’re Americans, and we were born with a sense of optimism that doesn’t always exist elsewhere. A British friend once told me that he thinks Americans have an optimism chip planted in our heads at birth. (Burns, 2008, p. 57)

This quote exemplifies a theme that has been running throughout the entirety of the primary narrative: American exceptionalism. The American volunteer participates in Peace Corps service because he or she is special, and always—no matter if prepared with technical knowledge or not—has something to offer the people of other countries. Volunteers are pressured to make their service mean something in the primary narrative, to describe the things that they made or did, because as Americans, it is believed there is no way for them not to have an effect. This Americentric logic is woven into the fabric of these stories, and the Host Country National as a characterization is a tool for presenting the things that the American volunteer accomplished.

When the stories revolve around making a difference and making one’s service sustainable, the Host Country National and Host Country National knowledge and learning are necessary to creating the narrative. In service of the narrative, their knowledge is described in the dismissive fashion, and when they are portrayed as integrating American ways or people into
their community, the narrative has succeeded. However, Fearnside (2008) and Genovese (2008) have no need for the Host Country National to integrate anything and are focused on relationship, rather than coming to an end-state of sustainability or meaningful difference.

I argue that Americentrism can be destabilized by the centering of the intercultural relationship, rather than one culture or the other, in the narratives of Peace Corps experience. This is important to postcolonial research. Though many researchers have focused on the need to de-center American or European ways of thought in research and the academy (Asante, 1988, 1998; Miike, 2007, 2008, 2010; Ngũgĩ, 2012), few have examined how the de-centering of American perspectives can occur in the lived experience of the Westerner. Both Afrocentricity (Asante, 1988, 1998) and Asiacentricity (Miike, 2007, 2008, 2010) are formulated from a perspective that the center should shift with the culture being studied. To hold an Afrocentric worldview, as “the ideological centerpiece of human regeneration, systematizing [African] history and experience with [their] own culture at the core of existence” (Asante, 2008), requires an intimate knowledge of African culture, history, and lived experience. To Asante, Afrocentricity is praxis; it is both the metatheory which guides theoretical and methodological choices in research, and the way that one lives. It is not something one can simply adopt, put on and take off, for a certain research project. Miike (2010) seems to be more hopeful that non-Asian people can be Asiacentric, but still the authors that the perform Asiacentric research have to have a familiarity with Asian ontologies and epistemologies (Miike, 2008). For the cultural researcher, this makes perfect sense. However, is there anything that the American can do to destabilize Americentrism?

This piece thus compliments work on de-centering American worldviews by adding a way in which Americentrism may be destabilized from the inside-out. The centering of the
intercultural relationship opens space for depictions of equitable relations between volunteers and Host Country Nationals, and destabilizes and deconstructs neocolonialism. The intercultural relationship allows for a radical encounter with Otherness (Simpson, 2008), leading to decolonizing narratives. In the next chapter, I connect the imperialistic narratives found in *A Life Inspired: Tales of Peace Corps Service* (Peace Corps, 2008c) with the raced narratives of the Peace Corps pamphlets. I argue that narratives of empowerment in volunteer discourse are not only a function of nation, but also of gender and race.
CHAPTER IV
HAVING THE POWER TO EMPOWER: THE RACED AND GENDERED BASIS OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Introduction

As observed in the last chapter, in order for a Peace Corps volunteer to claim that her service has been ‘effective,’ certain descriptions are made that denigrate Host Country National knowledge, and exemplify the importance of Host Country Nationals integrating something American into their way of life. The importance of this American integration to the narratives is based in the narrator’s assumption that there is something special or exceptional about Americans simply by virtue of them being American. Additionally, in Chapter II, I showed how the narrative constructed in official organizational materials conflated the normative American with white bodies. A Life Inspired: Tales of Peace Corps Service (2008c), though not officially representing the views and opinions of Peace Corps, is also published by Peace Corps, and thus can be taken to have similar ideological underpinnings as the officially produced pamphlets. Though it was not a focus of the preceding chapter, I briefly mentioned one way in which the normative American was normalized as white through those stories, as well (p. 96).

The assumption that the general American is white and the general American experience is a white experience underpins much more than the nine Peace Corps pamphlets that I analyzed. White Americans, according to Bonilla-Silva, form a white habitus (2010) which creates a sense of group belonging. The invisibility of this habitus leads to “whites’ lack of realization that race

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6 The book includes a disclaimer which states “The opinions expressed in A Life Inspired: Tales of Peace Corps Service are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Peace Corps or the government of the United States” (Peace Corps, 2008, n.p.).
matters in their lives” (p. 116). This lack of realization leads to a generalization of the white experience (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Simpson, 2008).

In this chapter, I analyze how intersections of race, gender, and nation are narrated in and around the notion of ‘empowerment,’ a development discourse which is often taken for granted (Kapoor, 2008). In a large recruitment session, in front of over 100 prospective volunteers, one returned Peace Corps volunteer even claimed, “Peace Corps is all about empowerment.” However, in this chapter I examine the politics in these narratives regarding who can empower and who needs empowerment. In narrating their experiences, “[p]eople draw on gendered, heteronormative, classed, raced and colonial discourses to… justify their action or inaction and make sense of the things that happen to them in organizational life” (Baines, 2010, p. 120).

Returned Peace Corps volunteers are no exception. In their narratives regarding their time spent abroad, Peace Corps volunteers draw on these discourses as a sensemaking aid. However, this action can be harmful to individuals and groups who do not fit within the hegemonic categories (Baines, 2010). In situationally constructed narratives of returned Peace Corps volunteers, the feeling of American exceptionalism necessary to be able to empower others is intricately tied to both whiteness and masculinity, harming not only Host Country Nationals, but also volunteers of color and women. In this chapter, I argue that access to American exceptionalism, and the power to empower, requires both whiteness and masculinity.

In this chapter, I examine how whiteness is tied to American exceptionalism. Specifically, I focus on moments where white volunteers’ generalizations of the white experience are challenged. In following the way in which race and nation are negotiated in practice, I find that white volunteer narratives typically assume that the American is exceptional, without realizing that it is not only their status as Americans, but also their race that gives them
access to this special privilege. This is indicative of what Simpson (2008) refers to as a “color-blind double bind;” the space of whiteness is at once narrated as both privileged and accessible. Additionally, I look at how female volunteers narrate their relationship to masculinity during Peace Corps service. I argue that in order for the female volunteer to claim access to American exceptionalism, she must enact masculinity.

In analyzing these dynamics of race, gender and nation in regard to narratives of ‘empowerment,’ I find that though empowerment is a central theme in Peace Corps volunteer talk, its negotiation in interactional discourse is complicated. Looking first at the way that Host Country National populations are narrated generally, I find contradictory views: Host Country National culture is presented as monolithic and static, yet also progressing developmentally toward the telos of American culture. I examine how these polarizations are used in the narrative to create the need for American involvement and to reinforce neocolonial global relations.

Drawing from over 300 pages of single-spaces fieldnotes and interview transcripts, this chapter links my own personal experience as a field researcher with the previous chapters of textual analysis. Though the textual fragments that I choose come more often from interviews than participant observation that does mean that I did not see similar themes throughout my fieldwork. Rather, the interview format made it easier for participants to delve in-depth into concepts represented more succinctly in other areas of my research. Thus, these quotations were chosen as they gave a more detailed account of the phenomenon I wanted to represent, but they are also representative of narratives found in other ethnographic contexts.

Throughout this chapter, I quote both myself and other returned volunteers. In order to protect the identity of the people I interviewed, I have not only changed the names of the people that I quote, but also removed the name of the country of service. In its place, I cite the region
where the country is located. I realize this action could be read as presenting entire regions as homogenous groups, but that is not at all my intention. In fact, I endeavor to be attentive to how this could be misconstrued and subvert the possibility.

My comments and thoughts are not only supplemental to this text but an integral part of it. I am indeed complicit in narratives of empowerment, and I reveal similar raced, gendered, and nationed assumptions in my own narrations to the people that I interviewed and interacted with. Yet, this chapter is not simply a personal reflection, rather I intertwine my own rhetoric in with that of other returned volunteers, for the issues that are at play here are not simply those of individuals, but rather systemic. As an individual, I am complicit in the ideological systems that serve to repress and marginalize people who are excluded from hegemonic categories. However, as an individual, I also have the ability to resist and destabilize the system. This chapter is my first step.

**Intersections of American Exceptionalism**

**Required: Whiteness**

It was a sunny, warm September afternoon, when I met a young woman for coffee in the courtyard by the library. We decided to sit and talk outside, in order to enjoy the sunlight and the breeze. As students passed by on their way to and from class, I asked her questions about why she was thinking about joining the Peace Corps and what had led to her interest in the organization. After she answered a few of my questions, she asked some of her own. Noting in one of my responses that I had shifted from studying physics as an undergraduate to completing Masters’ work in communication, she asked how it was that my life plan had changed so completely.
I didn’t know how to explain the complicated situations which had first drawn my attention to structures of inequality. I began by describing the gendered dynamics at work in my school in Sub-Saharan Africa, where I became utterly confused as to whether I had any role in certain problematic situations since I was an outsider, or if I did, what that role was. Conscious of the risk that my narrative could be read as villainizing men of this particular Sub-Saharan African country, I attempted to render a narrative that rather implicated Americans as perpetrators.

I got more interested in what are those dynamics, the social structures that keep people from being equal in different situations. A lot of it wasn’t just gender too, but also racial-nation inequalities that I saw happening. Like, volunteers at some point, some volunteers, not everyone, would begin to say things like, “Well, I deserve to sit at the head table at the banquet, because I’m white.” And it’s kind of a mindset that you get in to some extent, because you’re constantly being treated differently. Not just because—cuz not all volunteers are white, obviously, that one was—but being an American, being different, being from the place where they would all like to go live, you get treated differently. And if you let that go to your head, I don’t know, people started saying things where I’m like, “I don’t think that’s ok.” But when you’re just treated that way day after day after day after day, you start thinking about yourself differently.

In my carefully planned side-step around construing systemic power issues as the property solely of my Host Country, I ironically end up reinforcing a racialized view of Americans as normatively white.

In referring to this as a “racial-nation” inequality, I am assuming two things: that my Host Country is generally populated with Black people, and that America is generally populated with white. I catch myself in the middle of my statement and realize my mistake, but the remainder of the explanation rings a bit hollow. I don’t really know—as I claim I do—if this is actually an phenomenon based on being American; the volunteers that I was referring to who began thinking that they all deserved their place at the head table were all white. I assumed the experience that I
had as a white volunteer, and the experience of the white volunteers that I knew, was
generalizable to any American volunteer in the Sub-Saharan African country where I lived.

There are clearly other generalizations underlying my failed attempt at destabilizing
hegemony, but what I would like to focus on here is my conflation of ‘American’ with ‘white’ in
regard to the assumption of the *experience* of being a volunteer. In other words, though I knew
volunteers of color and would never consciously claim their experience to be the same as mine,
being unconscious of my own racial privilege led to the ability to generalize my experience.
Unfortunately, when reviewing my fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I realized that my
narrative above is not an isolated instance of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010); rather, it is
indicative of a theme found throughout white volunteer narratives. All the volunteers that I
interviewed self-identified as white,\(^7\) and all of the volunteers I spoke with at recruiting events
had light-toned skin. On multiple occasions, they revealed a similar assumption to my own.
Though these racist assumptions are clearly a problem in and of themselves, they also connect to
the larger issue of American exceptionalism and who has the power to ‘empower.’

The assumption in the narratives of white volunteers that their experience is
representative of volunteers writ-large ties into the idea that being American is special or
exceptional, as well as the invisibility of whiteness (Shome, 2000). As extensively reviewed in
the previous chapter, Americans as narrated in returned Peace Corps volunteer stories have
special knowledge and abilities that other nations are represented as not having. This narrative
of American exceptionalism is presented nearly unproblematically in the primary narrative
However, in that chapter, I do not address the connection of that narrative with the idea of white

\(^7\) It was not my intent to interview only white returned volunteers when I began this study. Rather, it happened that
no volunteers of color responded to my calls for interviews.
volunteer experience as generalizable. Here, I argue that the idea of American exceptionalism is dependent on an assumption of whiteness in returned volunteer narratives. And when American specialness is challenged because the volunteer in question is not white, that narrative is contradictory, and the white volunteer does not know how to make sense of the situation.

The following situation is an excellent example. Linda, a returned volunteer who served in a Sub-Saharan African country, describes her experience hitchhiking home one night with friends:

We—sometimes hitchhiking would be, it could be, if you were lucky, a six-hour experience, if you were going from [the capital city] to your village. [The capital city] is the capital. Or, it could be a twelve-hour. Because you could be waiting on the side of the road up to three hours—usually not more than that. And this happened to be a day where it was just taking longer than usual to get back to where we needed to before nightfall, because that was really usually the goal, was to get there before nightfall, to our destination. And I was traveling with two other Peace Corps volunteers, another white person like myself, and then an African American. And when I pulled over a car, it was an African American, and he said, “I don’t take black people.” And I said—I mean, I should have—this is how I look back on it. I should’ve just said, “Okay. See you later.” You know? I don’t want to be with someone who says comments like that. But instead I was like, “Well, he’s American!” And, you know, tried to, I don’t know, reason with him that way. And so he said yes, but then the whole car ride he kept trying to be almost apologetic and say things like, “I’m not racist, but…” and go on with his stories of how he saw differences between whites and blacks. And it was really uncomfortable for all three of the American volunteers, but especially for the African American volunteer. So, luckily he was only taking us an hour down the road. So we didn’t have as long of a ride with him as we could have. But we got out of that car, and we all said that we shouldn’t have gotten in the car with him. That just wasn’t fun. It wasn’t a good experience. It felt bad, felt wrong. It felt wrong even for me to say—I don’t know why I get so stuck on this—but why would I reason with him, “But he’s an American”? You know? I mean, I know I was appealing to him and making him maybe think about it, but I just don’t feel like that should be even an argument, you know? It shouldn’t be part of the fundamental reason why he should take us, because he’s an American. Yeah, he’s black, but he’s American. I felt really bad about that, but at the moment I just wanted to get home. And, I mean, I told my African American volunteer friend, I told him what he said. I was like, “Do you want to get in the car with someone who just said that?” And he hesitated, but he was like, “Let’s go.” So he also had the same feeling of just wanting to get down the road.
Importantly, Linda’s attempt to reason with the driver by labeling her Black friend “American” is narrated not only with guilt, but with confusion. First, note the way in which her guilt over the comment is deflected: she focuses on how difficult it was to get a ride that night and long they were waiting, and she adds at the end that the African American volunteer said it was fine and wanted to take the car, too. This functions similarly to diminutives in color-blind race talk (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), which attempt to qualify the racial significance of comment or phrase. Obviously, this is something that Linda has often thought about, reflected on, and wished she hadn’t said. However, it still bothers and confuses her. She asks rhetorically, “why would I reason with him?” and explains that she doesn’t “feel like that should be even an argument” at all. Linda cannot quite figure out why it shouldn’t be an argument, and why it bothers her so much that she tried to reason with him in that manner.

Fundamentally, it has revealed a contradiction. In the narrative seen throughout (white) returned volunteer discourse there’s an assumption that Americans are special simply by virtue of being American, regardless of race, which is a universalization of whiteness (Shome, 2000). But here’s an American who is not being recognized as special! To some extent, it makes sense, given these premises, to argue based on his American-ness, however to do so reveals the often overlooked underside of American exceptionalism: if Americans are special, other populations of the world are not. When Linda claims that his American privilege somehow outweighs his race, she accepts the bases that both race and nation mean something. She has come face-to-face in this circumstance with both her privilege as American and her privilege as white, but as it contradicts the hegemonic narrative of American exceptionalism, she is at an impasse.

This example is representative of multiple stories from a variety of returned volunteers in different contexts and situations. Thus, this inability to make sense of why Linda said what she
did is truly indicative of a larger narrative. Coupled with the idea that the mission of the Peace Corps is about “human empowerment,” in one volunteer’s words, this implies that the American mission to empower other peoples of the world is not simply an American mission, it is a white American mission. In these narratives, in order to access the privilege of American exceptionalism, whiteness is required. The ability to empower is an American privilege, and burden: the White Man’s Burden.

**Required: Masculinity**

Whiteness is not the only hidden requirement necessary in order to access the privilege of American exceptionalism in returned volunteer narratives. Additionally, there is a narrated performance of masculinity in the stories of both male and female volunteers. In this section, I focus on female volunteer masculinity as it allows access to the White Man’s Burden and ability to empower. I argue that, although this female masculinity disrupts some hegemonic power relations, it reinforces others. Additionally, female volunteers are only allowed, in these narratives, to claim masculinity up to a point. In closing, I examine the limits of female masculinity in these narratives.

I asked Anita, a returned volunteer who served in South America, about what her experience was like being a woman in her country of service. She replied:

Yeah, I guess that I didn’t face a lot of adversity, because I think that they [the men of her village] just saw me as a foreigner. And somehow that gave me some respect, even though I was a woman.

Here, Anita’s position as American gives her access to respect. This is contrasted with the way in which Anita spoke in the interview about the Host Country National women that she knew; Anita was respected “even though” she is a woman, however women of her South American
village were not allowed out of the house without their husband’s permission, were not aware of their husband’s affairs with other women, and were cat-called in the street.

Anita gains respect because they just saw her as a foreigner, and not a foreign woman. This begs the question: what kind of foreigner did they see her as, then? Anita’s narrative implies that her position as American gave her access to masculinity. Rather than having to deal with the gender roles of that particular South American village’s culture, she is able to transcend them because, in her narrative, the positionality of ‘American’ is assumed to be automatically a masculine positionality. Americanness is conflated with masculinity.

Well, Americanness is conflated with masculinity up to a point. Just as the conflation of American with ‘white’ is challenged, the conflation of American with ‘masculine’ is also challenged. Before examining such circumstances, however, let’s decipher where this conflation comes from. The assumption that ‘American’ necessarily implies ‘masculine’ is something that I see in returned volunteer narratives. Though, like the excerpt from an interview above, many of these stories present the idea under the guise of what the Host Country Nationals thought, we cannot forget that this is the volunteer’s narration of Host Country National thoughts. The volunteer is the one assuming the masculinity follows simply from being American. Though it may indeed be the Host Country National’s thought as well, we have no way of determining that. The texts which I am examining are returned volunteer narratives; they can only give a representation of Host Country National thought, and not the thought itself. In the same manner as Orientalist discourse (Said, 1978), these representations may be constructed to serve certain narrative, sensemaking goals, but they are not representative necessarily of actual people.

Since these narratives serve a sensemaking tool, asking what purpose the equation of ‘American’ with ‘masculine’ serves in volunteer narratives is important to understanding the
sense that is being made. In analyzing the narratives, I aver that the equation of ‘American’ with ‘masculine’ is required in order to hold the U.S. position of global hegemony in these narratives.

In the following excerpt from an interview, Tiffany describes what it was like being a woman in the Sub-Saharan African country in which she served. In this story, the assumed masculinity and respect that “should” come with being American was challenged:

I’ll never forget this government official—it was like a regional or a district government official—said something to me that I won’t remember what it is, but it was crass and it was inappropriate, and it was presumptuous, like something having to do with sexuality. And I called his ass out on the spot, in front of a bunch of government people. And I’m like, “What did you say to me? It is inappropriate for you to talk to me or any other woman in that manner, especially an American, on top of everything. We don’t abide for this, I won’t stand for this! I represent all the women in Peace Corps, I represent any other woman on the same position as me, I represent women from your country who you should treat with better respect.” I laid into him in front of all these people, and he backed off like, “Why are so upset? What’s the big deal?” And I was like, no fuck you – that’s how you always get away with this shit, and you’re oppressive. That was hard. But I was really—I was never afraid to just be like, fuck you. I just wasn’t. I just couldn’t be. I wish I would’ve been more PC [as in politically correct], but I don’t know if I would’ve gotten the same point across. And I wouldn’t have told Peace Corps about it—“I just told this guy to fuck off, what should I do?” I didn’t actually say it, but how do you translate tone? Like saucy, sass response. It’s hard. Cuz it’s like, I’ve always felt like when people were rude to you in a degrading-gender way, I wasn’t just responding for me, it wasn’t my personal response, it was for all women. Because I felt like I was really standing up against huge boundaries for women. And what type of woman would I be to not stand up against this shit right now? What type of—how would I be helping anyone if I just backed down? And I would never back down.

After the government official makes an inappropriate comment about her, Tiffany’s initial response implies that it was especially inappropriate for him to have said that to her because she’s American. Tiffany seems to say that he should have known better than to say that to an American, because Americans won’t stand for it. The assumption underlying Tiffany’s response is that Americans are masculine: they are not meek, but will necessarily fight back. Consider the
way she ends her story: that she will never back down. There is an assumption that as an American, even an American woman, she must enact masculinity.

If it is true that she must enact masculinity, she must have a reason for doing that. In her narrative, Tiffany sees it as her job to stand up to the official on the behalf of all women of the world. She states that she represents all women, everywhere. Here, again, is the logic of the White Man’s Burden: Tiffany sees it as her responsibility to stand up to that comment because it represents a “boundary” to all women, and not all women in the world can or will stand up for themselves, so she must do it for them! The assumption of American female masculinity also brings with it the implication that the females of other nations are not so empowered. As Mohanty (1991) describes, the narrative that the Western woman can and should stand up for the ‘Third World’ functions imperialistically and constructs a monolithic ‘Third World woman’ who needs saving. American females are able to stand up for other (female) people of the world because they’re American, and that implies masculinity—and power. By preserving the requirement of masculinity, Tiffany and other female volunteers are able to access American exceptionalism. The idea of American exceptionalism and the White Man’s Burden underlies her ability to act as hero of the women of the world. However, to be able to hold access to that hero position, the female volunteer must not let her masculine ability to save others be challenged: she has to hold her ground. Therefore, when the man attempted to objectify her through his inappropriate remark and reduce her to simply a bastion of female sexuality, Tiffany felt the immediate need to fight to keep her access to masculinity.

The narrative of female masculinity as part of American exceptionalism grows weaker around female sexuality and female safety. At another point during her interview, Tiffany spoke of the strange positionality that she occupied as female American living in an unfamiliar culture:
And that’s something that Peace Corps did teach us, and I did take to heart, is like you have to be careful, because you’re not—you’re in a very strange little bubble, like you have your own home, but say you have a [Sub-Saharan African] sexual partner—everyone’s gonna know! There’s no way nobody’s not gonna know! And you have to think about how that’s going to translate to the Life Skills lessons that you try and teach. Or to like going in and being respected by community members if they see you that way. It just doesn’t work.

Here is an instance where ‘American’ is not assumed to be equated with ‘masculine.’ Tiffany fears that if she, or another female American volunteer, were to be sexually involved with a man from this Sub-Saharan African country, they would immediately lose the respect that they automatically have by being American (according to the narrative). In other words, female masculinity is only acceptable up to a point. There is a rupture in the narrative when female masculinity is stretched to the point of accepting female sexuality: it does not work.

Additionally, female masculinity also ruptures the narrative when it challenges the female’s safety. Carolyn, a volunteer who served in a different Sub-Saharan African country, was asked how she felt as a woman “compared to other volunteers—to the male volunteers” in regard to safety and security. She was asked as part of a returned volunteer question-and-answer panel at a recruitment event with over 100 prospective volunteers in the audience. Carolyn answered:

Um, there are some points where it is a little difficult. When you’re looking for a ride, and you just want to get home, and a car comes up and it’s filled with all men, and it’s—okay do I take this ride? All drunk men, I should say. Um, do I take this ride, or do I wait til I feel more comfortable? So it’s really—a lot of it is common sense, especially for females. Don’t—you can’t put yourself in positions where you think something could happen. In that example, I decided to wait for the next ride, and I had to wait for a less drunk car.

Carolyn’s key advice is that female volunteers should not put themselves in situations where they think something might happen. As “common sense,” this deserves a little investigation: what exactly is it that American females should generally know? First, that females are responsible
for their own safety, and second, that female American masculinity does not work in situations where the female’s safety is judged (by her) to be in question.

Enacting masculinity when the female ‘should know better’ seems to imply that if some violation of her safety or person were to occur, that she would be to blame for the action. As feminist scholars have noted, victim blaming is often the result of a victim’s failure to conform appropriately to dominant combinations of femininity, whiteness, and heterosexuality (Carlson, 1999; Collins, 2005; Lamb, 1999). The narrative of victim blaming is quite prevalent in contemporary U.S. media and society, and here leads to a contradiction with the narrative of American as implying masculinity. If the female volunteer were to enact masculinity in these cases, she would be to blame for whatever violence results.

Thus, both the narrative of American as necessarily including masculinity and the narrative of American females being responsible for sexual violence perpetrated against them underlie returned volunteer discourse, and are especially evident in the stories of female Peace Corps volunteers. As displayed above, when the two narratives intersect, the contradiction often forces out the assumption of American masculinity, and instead, in this instance, casts inappropriate female masculinity as the force which makes sexual and gender-based violence or discrimination possible.

**American Exceptionalism and the Dynamics of Empowerment**

Thus, the White Man’s Burden trope, as narrated in returned Peace Corps volunteer stories, truly requires both whiteness and masculinity in addition to citizenship in certain nations. In these narratives, the White Man’s Burden is coupled with the idea of American exceptionalism in order that volunteers may ‘empower’ the people that they work and live with in ‘developing’ nations. In similar manner to the <clash of civilizations> ideograph, which
Cloud (2004) argues functions to rhetorically create the necessity of American involvement in Afghanistan in order to save “brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1988), the narrative of empowerment is based on assumptions of the White Man’s Burden in Peace Corps volunteer discourse. The volunteers speak of ‘obvious’ issues in their countries of service: gender equality issues, self-esteem issues, lack of resources, and racial tensions.

These ‘obvious’ problems are also narrated as things that Americans have the ability to help fix through empowerment. As an exemplar, one of the obvious problems that Linda saw in her Sub-Saharan African community was her students’ lack of self-esteem. They often used an Arabic phrase meaning “If God wills,” implying to Linda that they didn’t believe they had control over their own lives, which to her was “really sad.” She explained:

They weren’t empowered to believe that they had control because of the death that they had seen, and because of the years of apartheid. That was really tough for me. Just the phrase, “But we can’t, cuz we’re black.” And I did my best to, you know, fight those myths, but I’m just one person.

In Linda’s story, there are multiple factors contributing to the students’ belief—which she sees as a “myth”—that they do not have control over their lives. The first factor is that her students are Black, and second that they or their parents lived through apartheid. The coupling of black skin with the experience of apartheid implies that for many years, Black people were extremely oppressed, and to a large extent, did not have control over their lives. However, now that apartheid is over, Linda sees the barriers to Black students’ control of their lives as also having ended. Yet, thirdly, she does also admit that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and other diseases that are often fatal contribute to this feeling as well.

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8 Apartheid is not peculiar to South Africa, but also occurred and was governmentally regulated in other Southern African countries.
The underlying narrative in Linda’s comment is that she, as an American volunteer, knows better than the students: she knows that they can take control of their lives. However, for some reason they don’t believe that. This knowledge leads Linda to feel an imperative to help; her students clearly need her assistance in order for them to have a better way of life. Again, this functions in an imperialistic manner that dismisses the Host Country National experience of the world. In Linda’s narrative, believing in the “myth” that they do not have control is immediately assumed to be a bad thing and it leads to issues of self-esteem. She does not recognize this as a different way of experiencing and being in the world, but rather a mistaken view of the world based on the experiences they have that people aren’t meant to have. The implicit assumption in this narrative is that a white, middle-class, privileged American experience is normative, and experiences that differ—such as living under a racially oppressive regime or experiencing death as a normal, regular occurrence—cause these Sub-Saharan African students to see the world in the wrong way.

This creates a need for American assistance. Similar to Cloud’s (2004) study of Afghan women needing rescuing from their culture, and the (portrayed) inability for them to accomplish their own empowerment, here the African students need to be rescued by the (white) American from their own cultural mindset. It’s ironic that this serves to reinforce the Western ability to save, given that this mindset was constructed initially by white colonists (Fanon, 1963/2004; Ngũgĩ, 1986). In an interesting twist, somehow this narrative of raced inability is viewed differently than other dominant views. Balaji (2011) describes how pity for the Black population of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina quickly turned to anger because of the “inherent (white) American ideal that individuals can ‘pull themselves up’ from adversity” (p. 59). However, Balaji does not describe this same anger towards victims of the Haitian earthquake, nor does it
operate in this narrative of ‘empowerment.’ Rather, there is a sense of pity at the (racially and nationally) backwards state. Though the ability to ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps’ is assumed for Americans, even Americans of color, it is not thought to apply to people of ‘developing’ countries. However, this emotional response of pity is not not neutral, but “implicitly selfish and rooted in our desire to assert power over our Others” (Balaji, 2011, p. 64).

The key to American exceptionalism in this narrative is the assumption that only Americans have the life experience that people were meant to have, and thus have both the knowledge to fix the obvious problems that they see, and the ability to actually see that those problems exist in the first place. The students that Linda describes don’t realize that saying they cannot achieve something because they’re black is a problem, as it is to Linda, but rather believe it to be truth. This is seen as the ignorance of the backwards native (Balaji, 2011). Thus, in this narrative, an imperative is constructed for ‘empowerment’ of the Other. As discussed in the last chapter, this empowerment is narrated as something special that only Americans can give; something American needs to be integrated.

**Host Country Culture: Stable and Monolithic**

The imperative for integration of something American into the Host Country culture in volunteer narratives is based on an idea of the Host Country culture as monolithic and stable. Volunteers, in both interviews and at recruitment events, often describe “the culture” of their Host Country as “patriarchal” or “very patriarchal.” A few avoid the generalization inherent in these statements by speaking only of their own community, or the school environment in which they taught, however, there is still an assumption that patriarchy is something that exists over there, and not in the United States. Volunteers speak of Host Country culture as monolithic in other ways beyond the aspect of gender, as well. In most interviews and fieldnotes, the volunteer
spoke of the Host Country culture as singular. Only one volunteer differentiated between possible Host Country cultures; he had served in an indigenous community in South America, and differentiated their culture from the Latino culture of the same country.

One particularly eventful evening, I was assisting with set-up for the Peace Corps Extravaganza. I had volunteered to run the welcome table and had a variety of Peace Corps paraphernalia to hand out to anyone attending. The recruiter had invited a dance troupe from Ghana to perform. The dancers, who consisted of three Black men and two white women, were all dressed in colorful Ghanian garb and sitting outside of the entrance, to my right. Two of the men wandered over to my table.

Male dancer 1: Uh, hi. Is it okay for me to get one of the key chains?
Me: Oh yes, yes it is.
Male dancer 1: Okay, thank you.
Me: And if you want to take pens or highlighters—
Male dancer 1: Okay! Me, I love pens.
Me: Take whatever you want!
Male dancer 2: Well, hello!
Male dancer 1: (looks at me intensely) You said whatever we want?
Me: Well, not everything you want. The chairs have to stay, and—
Male dancer 1: You have to stay?
Me: And I have to stay. It’s true.
Male dancer 2: But you say that we can everything, so I was about to say maybe we can have you too.
Me: No, sorry—it doesn’t work that way. Also my boyfriend would get mad.
Male dancer 1: Aren’t you looking for a change?
(Both dancers laugh)
Me: How about I give you two of these instead (hands them highlighters). I hear your accents, where are you from?
Male dancer 1: Ghana.
Me: You’re from Ghana.
Male dancer 2: You should visit.
Me: I should. I lived in Tanzania…but that’s very far away.
Male dancer 1: (annoyed) Tanzania is different.

Though emotion does not really come across in my transcript of the event, I was angry at these two men. I was extremely offended, in a way that these comments did not of their own account
deserve. Importantly, I was also immediately angry at myself. Throughout the interaction, I felt myself tensing and tried to react differently—I realized that I was making unjust generalizations. I spent a long portion of the remainder of the evening reflecting over why it was that their romantic propositioning made me so angry and uncomfortable. Though I don’t like the implication of anyone “having” me like a piece of property, it went deeper than that. My assumptions are revealed in the last few exchanges. I knew that they were African from their accents, and I had unconsciously labeled them in my mind as such: as African. When they tell me they’re from Ghana, I say that I’ve been to Tanzania. Why should that matter? By this point in the interaction, I had realized my own colonialist assumptions: I conflated these men with all African men in my mind and based my reaction to them on an assumption that they participated in a patriarchal and heteronormative culture. The comment that I made about having lived in Tanzania was my last-ditch attempt to try to shift away from my generalizations about African men and find a way to connect with them as individuals. However, by doing so, I tragically reinforced the colonial implications. The men, then, were insulted when I seem to imply that I had had a comparable experience to visiting their country by living in an entirely different African country, and one that is on the other side of the continent at that! In my attempt to move away from a monolithic idea of African patriarchy, I inadvertently assumed a different monolithic ‘Africa.’

In my mind, by hitting on me, they had behaved exactly in the way that I expected African men to behave, and my mind reverted right back to everything I had stereotyped Tanzanian men to be when I lived there. I had, in an instant, betrayed my critical commitments, and ignored the racist, heteronormative, and paternalistic assumptions I was making. I took this flirtatious comment as a demeaning slap because I assumed that all African men are misogynistic
and objectify women, and as this comment came from African men, it is representative of all African men and their objectification of women. And that made me angry.

It’s difficult for me to consider how I might have reacted if a white American-born man had said the same thing to me, there at the welcome table. Most likely, I would have brushed it off as a rather pathetic attempt to ask me out on a date, and leave it at that. However, because I connected to this to an underlying personal stereotype I had of (Black) African men, I saw it as representative of the men of an entire continent. I had assumed the culture of a continent in regard to gender to be monolithic.

This case reveals rather potently a narrative that underlies many volunteer stories. The sentiment of “that’s just the cultural mentality” was often expressed in regard to Host Country National culture. This phrasing also implies that the narrative of culture is static. But how, if the people are not expected to change, does the White Man’s Burden of empowerment stay in effect? There can be no impetus for trying to change a culture if that culture is monolithic and stable. In the next section, I explore the relationship between cultural stability and a teleology of development.

**Host Country Culture and the Telos of American Development**

Volunteer narratives, in order to reconcile the perceived “need” Host Country Nationals have to be empowered with the assumption that Host Country culture is static and cannot change, relate current Host Country ‘culture’ to American ‘culture’ in the past. However, in the narrative, this telos of development is dependent upon American interference and assistance. Unless there is American assistance in human ‘empowerment,’ the Host Country culture will remain static, and they will not fulfill their developmental possibility and promise.
The idea that Host Country cultures are simply ‘behind the times,’ and will eventually catch up to the pinnacle that has been reached by American culture was voiced by many volunteers. Carl, when explaining his view of gender equality issues in the developing world writ-large, said, “You know, and in America, we’ve come a long way in terms of like gender equality, and whereas in a developing country, it’s like a hundred years ago.” Clearly, this is problematic in portraying America as the standard for development, and reveals an Americentric worldview. However, additionally it implies that the United States does not have gender issues, rather than implying that the U.S. has different gender issues than other countries. Again, the assumption throughout the narrative is that the United States has progressed beyond patriarchy, and represents a post-feminist society. Ironically, this assumption itself is patriarchal, revealing the contemporary oppression of the feminine in U.S. society. This oppression hides behind a mask of post-feminism, and protects its existence in the very way Carl has utilized it here: by purporting that gender issues exist in other countries, but not here.

The Americentrism of the narrative that ‘developing’ countries are temporally behind the United States on a linear path of development creates the basis for American intervention and the enactment of ‘empowerment.’ The teleological movement is dependent upon American intervention. Otherwise, the Host Country cultures will remain the in the same, monolithic form indefinitely. Anita, when describing her moral struggle with the way in which (heterosexual) romantic relationships worked culturally in the South American village she lived in, elucidated

I feel like a lot of developing countries are, if I could relate it back to U.S. history, like fifty years ago, and how they just have to progress from that. And it’s almost like they’re just behind times. Then I feel like there’s at least hope that things are going to change. And it’s more—let’s focus on the bigger picture, and getting the infrastructure there, so that they could eventually move towards thinking in a different way and more progressive way. Because if I just started there without all of the other infrastructure existing, it didn’t make sense to them, and they didn’t value that at all.
In the second half of the excerpt, Anita is describing what she feels like her place is in assisting a cultural shift in gender roles. She attempted to “focus on the bigger picture” and “getting the infrastructure there,” because if she immediately attempted to get the men in her village to marry only one woman, or allow their wives a voice, “they didn’t value that at all.” That’s because, in her view, they are too far behind. Americans need to help in getting the correct infrastructure in place; in other words, the culture is not going to be able to develop unless there is some structure provided to ‘help’ them ‘develop’ in the ‘correct’ manner.

Thus, the idea of integrating American knowledge runs through these volunteer narratives, just as it does the book of returned volunteer stories. In this narrative, unless something American is brought in, unless Americans use their exceptionality to empower the Host Country, the culture will remain static. Anita, above, describes this idea as providing hope that things can change. This, of course, implies that the most hoped-for situation, the most sought-after change, should be the realization of the same type of development that exists in America.

The tension of two disparate cultures existing in coevalness (Fabian, 1983) or co-temporality is not allowed to stand. In a similar manner to anthropological narratives that distance the Other in order to present ‘objective’ work (Fabian, 1983), the volunteer cannot hold in this narrative the difference of her home culture and the culture in which she lived and worked without displacing one temporally. Removing the Host Country National culture to the realm of American’s past allows the volunteer to escape the necessity of making sense of the contradictions between the cultures, moralities, and ethics that she has been exposed to.

**Conclusion: The Created Need for Neocolonialism**
In this chapter, I argued that American exceptionalism is not only based on national hierarchies, but also raced and gendered. Additionally, I aver that the American Peace Corps volunteer narrative of ‘empowerment’ is based on this gendered, raced, and nationed idea of American exceptionalism. When negotiated in interactions, the volunteer is often presented with contradictions between this narrative and other hegemonic narratives of American society, and handles the different intersections of contradiction in different ways. Ultimately, this narrative creates a foundation for American intervention into the ‘developing’ world. To conclude this chapter, I examine the way in which this volunteer narrative reinforces the place of the United States as a global neocolonial power, and suggest theoretical implications.

In an interview with a female volunteer named Robyn, who served in a South American country, she mentioned that there was something extremely special to her about her Peace Corps experience.

Robyn: I have a lot of pride in what I did. Which I had never really, you know, I’ve always done well in school, and really excelled at what I was doing, but I don’t think that was ever something that I was super proud about, just because it wasn’t—because I didn’t take ownership for it. But I have so much ownership towards the community I was in, and the projects that I did, relationships that I still have with the town. I’m really proud of that. And I think sometimes I wonder if that, like, I’ll never feel that again. Or if, at least, I’ll always be looking for that, and if that’s changed my perception on what I can accomplish. Yeah.

Me: Do you think it’s changed that perception—in what sort of way has it changed that perception?

Robyn: Meaning like, I wonder if I’ll always be feeling a lack of—Like, I’m not doing enough because you just don’t have that same ability—It’s such a unique experience, that you’re never going to find that in anything else. Right? So, it’s something that I feel really proud about having achieved, but never being able to find that again. Does that make sense?

Robyn, in summing up her experience, explains that her perception of what she has the ability to accomplish has been changed, and implies that here in the United States, she will never have the
chance to accomplish so much again. She does not have “that same ability” here in the U.S. When I pushed for explanation, she repeated her sentiment, but did not make her ideas any more concrete. It seems that Robyn was able to facilitate a special kind of change with her projects in South America that she may never be able to enact in her life (that is, here in the United States) again.

Connected with the narrative that has been discussed so far in this chapter, Robyn implies that she will not be able to have such amazing accomplishments that she can be proud of living here in the U.S. because there is not enough to change here. The massive impact, the accomplishments that Robyn are so proud of, could only be made in a country that has a ‘long way to go,’ so to speak. As Host Country cultures are narrated as developmentally behind the U.S., there are a variety of large changes that ostensibly need to be made before they can reach the U.S.’s level of development. Robyn can never enact that kind of change again in America because there is an assumption that America is so much farther along in terms of knowledge and equality, that there is not much change to implement.

All the narratives weave together to form a perceived need for American intervention and assistance. Though it is clearly neocolonial in foundation and intention, volunteers, including myself, do not often perceive such dynamics, because the narrative is constructed in such a way that it portrays the people of Host Countries as suffering under patriarchal systems, and in desperate need of American aid. Thus, though Peace Corps volunteers narrate their experiences as positive, contributing to the development of the community, they are based on neocolonial assumptions, and create the need for neocolonial intervention.

The (RED) campaign has been heavily criticized for similar reasons (Bell, 2011; Repo & Yrjölä, 2011; Richey & Ponte, 2008; Yrjölä, 2009). Though it seeks to raise financial and
medical aid for ‘Africa,’ it is a consumerist campaign which also serves to reinforce the economic systems which created the need for aid in Africa in the first place. In addition, it represents ‘Africans’ in a neocolonial manner and reinforces imperialist logics (Bell, 2011).

Kapoor (2008) examines his and his field’s own neocolonizing tendencies, and how “working in development inevitably positions [one] within a ‘development discourse,’ where the North’s superiority over the South is taken for granted, and Western-style development is the norm” (p. 42). He argues that changing this discourse requires more than “mere good intentions” (p. 42), and in fact necessitates a total reframing of the field. However, other postcolonial scholars do not necessarily agree. Norander and Harter (2012), for instance, in their analysis of a Western-based women’s rights organization that helps women in ‘developing’ communities, realize that the term “empowerment” is political, but still find the organization to be doing good work. Though based on hierarchies of national positioning, the partnerships on an individual level can lead to an equitable relationship between the West and the Global South (Norander & Harter, 2012).

Similarly, though this primary volunteer narrative participates in multiple hegemonic forces, it is not the only narrative. There are points of contradiction where the Peace Corps volunteer is forced to adopt a different narrative, in order to make sense of things he has experienced. Indeed, this chapter showcased the beginnings of critical consciousness: Linda, in her story of hitchhiking with her African American friend, was forced to narrate her reflections on the experience, and in the process of putting it into words, realized her own confusion and discomfort. Moments of disruption, where assumptions are challenged, can lead to destabilization of hegemonic power relations wrapped into the narratives. In the following
chapter, I examine areas of where the primary narrative is ruptured, and space is created for narratives of decolonization.
CHAPTER V

PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER NARRATIVES AND THE DISRUPTION OF HEGEMONY

Introduction

This chapter focuses on disruption as an addition to and expansion of the preceding chapter. In Chapter IV, I argued that in Peace Corps volunteer narratives the power to empower Others is predicated on certain intersections of hegemonic positionalities, which end up reinforcing that the White Man’s Burden is indeed a white work as well as a man’s work. I then examined how these intersectional positionalities work in the narrative to necessitate American neocolonial intervention in the ‘developing’ world. The main narrative of Peace Corps volunteer work thus supports existing power structures.

However, through their storytelling, Peace Corps volunteers also have the ability to disrupt this main narrative and disrupt current hierarchies of power. In this chapter, I argue that the Peace Corps experience itself creates opportunities to rupture hegemonic narratives, and have a radical encounter with Otherness (Simpson, 2008) that “opens possibilities for mutual redefinition” (Simpson, 2008, p. 143). The experience of living day-to-day with people who are different than you creates the space for disruption. Like the site of Norander and Harter’s (2012) study, Peace Corps is an institution of privilege, and the experience of traveling to another country to live there for two years is not one that every person has the opportunity to participate in. Yet this experience, privileged though it may be, has the potential to reduce the distance between cultures that creates superiority (Balaji, 2011), and allows for the disruption of hegemonic narratives.
Before continuing, I should explain why I chose to examine these sites of destabilization as ‘rupture’ rather than ‘resistance.’ Kraidy (2002), comments that intercultural interactions are “ontologically complex” (p. 316), and must be understood as “complex, processual, and dynamic” (p. 316). Typically, when critical scholars speak of resistance, they speak of resistance enacted within a single hierarchy, aimed at destabilizing a certain powerful group, or towards a single emancipatory goal. However, as demonstrated in the last chapter, Peace Corps volunteers are attempting to make sense of a complicated web of inter-relating power dynamics. More importantly, volunteers hold a relatively privileged position in regard to intersecting global power hierarchies and are narrating their experience from within that position. As privileged voices they often, for one, act to disrupt power structures unconsciously, and two, act to disrupt the very position they personify.

Postcolonial theory recognizes that both conscious and unconscious resistance are valid and valuable (Bhabha, 1994; Prasad & Prasad, 2003b). However, in these theories unconscious resistance is seen in terms of the colonized resisting the colonizer (Bhabha, 1994) or the worker resisting the manager (Prasad & Prasad, 2003b). The term ‘resistance’ is usually reserved for oppressed peoples, and not those occupying the very positions of power being resisted. Describing moments that Peace Corps volunteers ‘flip the script’ of their narratives—briefly de-centering whiteness and the West—as ‘resistance’ could be seen as co-opting the term. I do not want to imply that instances of volunteer narratives are doing the same work as workers’ movements or indigenous resistance. The moments when Peace Corps volunteer narratives briefly destabilize hegemonic ideologies that they themselves benefit from at least in part represents something different. Therefore, I will be referring to these instances as disruptions or moments of rupture rather than resistance.
There is no “outside” of ideology (Cloud & Gunn, 2011), but ideologies may be shifted, changed, and disrupted from within. The narratives that Peace Corps volunteers call on to describe their experiences are not new, but laced in with competing ideologies and laden with power interactions. However, there are moments where the main narrative discussed in the previous chapter is disrupted, and space is created for new, decolonizing narratives. In this chapter, I do not present volunteer stories as if they have created a new narrative or are suddenly acting a decolonizer rather than colonizer. Instead, I reveal moments where the primary narrative of (white) Peace Corps service as empowering the developmentally backward people (of color) that need their assistance is ruptured. The rupture presents more of a space for a competing narrative than a competing narrative itself. By examining these spaces, I begin to show the possibilities for decolonizing narratives and open up opportunities for thinking about how to reframe future narratives.

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine three instances in which hegemonic ideologies in the primary narrative are disrupted: how racial hegemony is disrupted, how national hegemony is disrupted, and how the White Man’s Burden—or the constructed necessity for American intervention—is disrupted. After the disruption of the need to intervene to developmentally assist ‘Third World’ nations, it may seem as if the Peace Corps has no role. If the narrative of global intervention is disrupted, it seems to negate the organization’s role and purpose for being. Thus, the final section of this chapter focuses on reframing, and specifically a moment of ontological reframing which opens up new possibilities for Peace Corps narratives.

The concerned scholar might note that I am not analyzing any disruptions of gendered hierarchies in the narrative. Indeed, there is no section of analysis regarding the disruption of gendered hegemony. Unfortunately, throughout the data texts that I collected, any gender
disruptions served to reinforce the hegemony of other power dynamics such as whiteness and Americentrism. Though the way in which these intersectional power dynamics are negotiated in tension would certainly give interesting insight, and could potentially hold display undertheorized contradictions and double-binds, such a study does not fit the goal of this chapter. Here, I wish to consider disruptive spaces in the narrative from which the entirety of the narrative may be re-imagined. Though I examine complexity and the ways in which the narrator struggles with those tensions and negotiates them through discourse—sometimes failing to recognize all the power relationships in play—I do not, here, examine narratives in which the volunteer absolutely reinforces one hierarchy while disrupting another. It was this character that was very nearly always displayed in areas where gendered hierarchies were destabilized.

**Rupture**

**Disrupting Racial Hegemony**

In his seminal work *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991), David Roediger argues that affiliation with whiteness was an active choice that pre-white workers in the nineteenth century made. These workers, though living and working in conditions quite similar to those of Black slaves, chose to separate themselves as ‘white’ rather than align themselves with (Black) slaves and fight together for better working conditions. Whiteness is thus not ‘natural,’ but is rather the consequence of a series of historical decisions (Roediger, 1991). Therefore, the invisible centering of whiteness and white bodies in contemporary U.S. society is a construction that was discursively created (Roediger, 1991), is discursively reinforced (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Shome, 2010) and thus can also be discursively destabilized and undone.
Even though whiteness is not natural, it is “nevertheless as real and as problematic in intellectual, moral and political terms” (Roediger, 1991, p. 12) as if it were. Since whiteness—an immaterial ideological force—still has material consequences, it is important to address and de-center. In addition, whiteness and other racial formations can change form in order to hold hegemony (Omi & Winant, 1994), and can thus be difficult to grasp and remove. As addressed in the last chapter, even when consciously attempting not to reinforce hegemonic positions of power, whiteness is a dynamic that often escapes attention by those benefitting from its privilege, including myself.

It follows that when white volunteers narrate their experiences as white people living in an area whose populations are predominantly people of color, one might expect such volunteers to reinforce the hegemony of whiteness in their stories. Yet, every so often, whiteness is disrupted. In the following excerpt from an interview, John answers the question of what it was like being a white male volunteer in the Sub-Saharan African village in which he lived.

It was more common for me to see a Black albino person than another white person, even in towns, or in the regional capital. So you always stick out and in that culture it’s not impolite to stare, so people would just stare. I guess that’s one of those things you can try to go out of your way to understand—it’s totally okay to stare, and I’m this—I mean, my skin’s all messed up compared to theirs, so might as well!

Though it may seem like a simple comment for John to say that his skin is the skin that is “messed up,” this comment has important ideological implications. John has temporarily de-centered whiteness, and centered Blackness in its place. By referring to Black skin as normative, and white skin as deviant from the norm, John has shaken the hegemony of whiteness in racial power structures. In addition, John emphasizes the strangeness of his skin; everyone stares at him, because he is an oddity. John easily could have framed the staring as springing from any
number of alternate motivations—jealousy, desire, reverence—but he chooses to frame it in a way that denigrates white skin, and emphasizes the perfection of Black skin.

Though it might not seem like it, whiteness is ultimately destructive to everyone (Roediger, 1991), and not only those displaced to the periphery by its invisible centering. Rather, by comparing the “wages of whiteness” with the Biblical ‘wages of sin’, Roediger (1991) implies that death follows white hegemony. Affiliation with whiteness weakened the position of blue-collar pre-white workers in the nineteenth century, and caused them to be unable to revolt for better wages, benefits, and rights (Roediger, 1991). Whiteness is still similarly destructive, and though it may not seem to be in a white volunteer’s best interest to de-center whiteness, it is.

**Disrupting National Hegemony**

In the last chapter I discussed the ways in which Host Country cultures are described as having ‘obvious’ issues that the Peace Corps volunteer can see. There, the focus of the discussion was on the use of this characterization to necessitate American intervention into the Host Country culture. However, here I examine more deeply how ‘developing’ countries are represented as having ‘obvious’ issues. According to the last chapter, such problems with the Host Country often revolved around patriarchy, gender roles, and sexual violence. In public discourse, people of the ‘developing’ world are often depicted as savage and violent. Though this is rarely presented as harshly in Peace Corps volunteer narratives, it is still an important ideological force to consider. In order to examine this moment of rupture in the narrative of U.S. national supremacy, I first address the public discourse which acts as a background to this narrative.

European narratives of the international Other, both academic (Said, 1978) and literary (Said, 1993) have portrayed Other as savage and violent for hundreds of years. This continues
today in American discourse regarding the Middle East (Cloud, 2004), Haiti (Balaji, 2011) and Africa (Fair & Astroff, 1991) among other places. These media representations of the international Other serve to reinscribe both the U.S. as the dominant global power (Cloud, 2004) and ideological views that naturalize people of color as inherently violent (Balaji, 2011; Fair & Astroff, 1991). Thus, media narratives describe the international Other (read: person of color) in the developing world as extremely dangerous—and especially so to American (read: white) women. This racialized portrayal of the international Other is further reinforced by media coverage of domestic sexual violence that demonizes the Black male as the sole perpetrator of such heinous crimes (Enck-Wanzer, 2009).

In the past year, coverage regarding sexual violence perpetrated against Peace Corps volunteers while overseas has appeared in all the major news outlets (Crawford, 2011; Henderson, 2011; Hill & Kreider, 2011; Rein, 2011; Schechter, 2011a, 2011b; Stolberg, 2011), prompting a variety of public responses. Blog posts such as this—

This website has repeatedly pointed to the danger of rape and murder faced by white women in neighborhoods, cities, and countries with significant nonwhite populations. Now some of that truth is entering the mainstream, with ABC’s report that over 1,000 American women working for the Peace Corps have been raped or sexually assaulted in foreign countries over the last ten years. (Auster, 2011, para. 1)

—make it clear that images of Black rapists (Enck-Wanzer, 2009), Black violence (Balaji, 2011; Fair & Astroff, 1991), and Brown ‘terrorists’ holding guns (Cloud, 2004) in the media have firmly reinforced the racist stereotype that men of color are inherently more violent than white men. Additionally, though the races of the victims and perpetrators are never explicitly mentioned in the media on sexual assault in the Peace Corps, the author of this blog post assumes a racial dichotomy: that the victims are all white, and the perpetrators are all people of color.
In media discourse surrounding Peace Corps and sexual violence, the typical gendered dichotomy—of private as being the space of the woman and public as being the masculine space that the woman should not trespass in—is stretched so that the private realm of woman becomes the confines of the U.S., and the public, masculine realm becomes globalized. Recognized rape myths, such as the false assumption that most rapes are perpetrated by strangers, are based on a characterization of the home as ‘safe’ for the woman, and the outside as ‘dangerous.’ Feminist scholars of gender-based violence argue that this characterization both exaggerates the danger of ‘outside’ and negates any danger that may be faced ‘in the home’. In public discourse regarding sexual violence in the Peace Corps, this leads to an assumption of the U.S. as ‘safe’ for women, and the developing world outside as inherently ‘dangerous.’ For example, a commentator on a firstresponseaction.org blog writes,

The lesson is it's not realistic for young women to travel alone in dangerous third-world countries. Even as a guy, I would not travel in these places with less than one male travel companion, preferably two. If you were living with two other Americans, you would have the social and physical power to deter rape (Frazee, 2011).

The author of this comment assumes both that third world countries are necessarily dangerous and that Americans are necessarily safe.

This raced narrative of the ‘developing’ world as aggressive, violent, and dangerous, though only appearing explicitly in a few returned Peace Corps volunteer interactions, still clearly underlies the popular understanding of the ‘third world’ in American public discourse. However, in one notable interaction, this idea of ‘developing’ countries as inherently dangerous is de-centered. In this part of our conversation, Tiffany was describing her role as a peer supporter among other Peace Corps volunteers in the Sub-Saharan African country she served in.
She began talking about how volunteers aren’t thinking about the possible dangers when they go overseas:

But being able to be supported by amazing people—especially Mike—and then being able to be supported—like Mike supporting me, and being able to support other people through really just crazy ass shit. Because you don’t know what it’s going to be like. You don’t think about the fact that you’re going to have friends whose parents die while you’re there. Whose like family members are in car accidents. There’s things that you do to yourself when you move around to the other side of the world. You’re removing yourself, but it’s hard. You tell yourself, “I’ll be fine,” or “I’ll deal with it when it comes.” But then it comes and you’re like, “Oh my god.” You just make it work. But thank god we were there to help people. And to help each other.

Tiffany ruptures the narrative that holds American global supremacy by instilling fear that ‘developing’ countries are inherently dangerous and unstable. Rather, she portrays the United States as the place where violent things happen, and that one never considers when becoming a volunteer all the things that can happen to other people back home while one is gone. The trauma that she describes supporting people through is not based in Host Country National violence, but violence in the United States.

This conceptualization of violence de-centers the U.S. as the ‘safe’ place free from harm or danger. It also shatters the myth that people of color, whether domestically or internationally, are the sole perpetrators of violence by narrating violent circumstances that are not necessarily perpetrated by anyone at all. Violence, in the hegemonic narrative, is attached to the bodies of people of color, and not to circumstance. By considering such violent circumstances as car accidents and medical emergencies (later in the interview, Tiffany clarified that the specific experience of parental death that she was referencing was a volunteer’s father dying of a heart attack) Tiffany ruptures the narrative that regards violence as something that happens solely in ‘third world’ countries, and solely perpetrated by people of color.

**Disrupting the White Man’s Burden**
It may not be immediately obvious how this section differs from the two immediately preceding. Though it involves both racial and national power structures, the White Man’s Burden goes beyond mere representation of the Other to an imperative to relate to the Other in a certain way. In volunteer narratives, as discussed in the previous chapter, this takes the form of an obligation to “empower” the people of the Host Country. This paternalistically assumes the Peace Corps volunteer to be positioned above the Host Country National, and that the volunteer has the power to empower.

Yet, what would the Peace Corps be without the White Man’s Burden? Since the Peace Corps is predicated on the assumption that other countries are somehow lacking, how can this narrative be disrupted and the Peace Corps still exist? Kapoor (2008) addresses the same concern in development studies, and finds that, though the perspective of the field needs to be reframed, there are still material inequities that could serve to be addressed. Peace Corps Host Countries request trained workers to perform certain jobs for which training does not exist in their country, or when there are not enough people to fill the needed number of positions. For instance, in the Sub-Saharan African country that I lived in as a physics teacher, there was a clear need for science teachers nationwide. There simply were not enough teachers in that country to fill the amount of teaching jobs. I argue that the act of Peace Corps volunteers filling such positions is not inherently neocolonial, but that Peace Corps becomes neocolonial when the mission shifts to changing or ‘fixing’ the culture or the people.

Though there are claims that Peace Corps puts pressure on certain countries to request volunteers and to request a certain type of volunteer (Diuguid, 1967), there is no denying the material reality that some countries need or want trained workers they just don’t have. Of course, most Host Countries also have a history of colonialism and oppression that extracted
their resources, repressed their traditions and culture, and left them in dire economic straits, causing them to feel the need to prioritize ‘development’ according to a Western standard in their goals. Part of the prioritization is the request of trained workers such as English teachers from the Peace Corps. Though the United States is culpable in many ways for the severe pressure Host Countries feel to ‘develop,’ there is still some morality—if only a little—in helping a neighbor who asks for assistance. Tu (2008) and Simpson (2008) find the key to be in the mutuality of such an encounter—the U.S. should not only serve, but be served.

The larger issue presents itself when the volunteer begins to want to “fix” the culture in addition to doing the job he was sent to perform. An implicit rejection of the mutuality described above, ‘fixing’ the culture is based on an assumption that American culture is without fault. This idea of the White Man’s Burden, helping the Other to develop both economically and culturally, assumes the American as the standard of perfection (or close enough) and compares Host Country culture and tradition to that. This narrative is seldom disturbed in returned volunteer discourse, and when it is it causes confusion. The volunteer is not sure how to make sense of her experience if she was not actually ‘helping’ people, when she had previously narrated the crux of her experience as ‘helping others.’

In this interview excerpt, Carl spoke of his complicated relationship with his housemate, a Sub-Saharan African male teacher with whom Carl also taught at school. The teacher was about 20 at the time they became housemates, and Carl was 24. Carl described how he found out after one Christmas break that the teacher had been caught with a student in his bedroom. When I asked him about that situation, Carl responded:

Me: Can I ask—when you first found out that he had had students over often and that sort of thing, what was your initial reaction to that?
Carl: Well, it was hard to deal with. I never really confronted him directly about it—I didn’t really feel like it was my place. He had already been confronted by the principal of our school, so I guess when I saw that he was kind of starting to change on his own, I just kind of let it run its own course. It’s a really difficult thing to deal with and I mean, it also—it happened at lots of different schools around the country, you know, it happened at another volunteer’s school a lot worse, actually. And, so I don’t know, I mean, I didn’t really know what my place was to really do anything about it. I guess, I’d like to think that if nothing had happened, if there weren’t any consequences, that yeah, I would’ve stepped in and raised my voice—but it was just so complicated. You know, it’s like that’s the culture, and it’s a strange line to walk, I guess, dealing with what is—how far do you go in enforcing what you think is right versus what is just accepted in their culture? And that’s something that I struggled with a lot, especially with the gender equality things like this where you know, teachers getting caught with students. Of course, I don’t think it’s right at all, and it’s—I would hope to think that I would have stepped in if the community hadn’t have already taken their course.

Judging from this explanation, it seems that Carl still has not settled for himself the question that he poses: how far do you go in enforcing what you think is right? This example of disruption is not as clean and radical as the other two that I have analyzed. The connection to the Peace Corps’ mission makes this narrative difficult for volunteers to confront. However, Carl asks a number of questions that engage with the idea that perhaps the White Man’s Burden gives a faulty script for handling intercultural moral conundrums. Rather than simply deferring to his own moral judgment, Carl questions how far he should be led by it in intercultural circumstances.

However, Carl cannot abdicate responsibility for overseeing the situation totally, even though he says that he “didn’t feel like it was [his] place.” He still feels the need to emphasize that if the principal of his school or the community hadn’t stepped in, that he would have reconsidered intervening. In fact, he says, “I would hope to think that I would’ve stepped in” (emphasis mine). His moral values, values that he sees as somewhat universal (“I don’t think it’s right at all”), are oppositional to another value—that it’s not his place to step in. Rather than the
White Man’s Burden being reproduced unproblematically, Carl catches himself in a double-bind. In order to fulfill one value he must intervene, and in order to fill the other, he must not. Thankfully for Carl’s narrative, the principal and community have this same moral commitment, and they discipline the teacher for his mistake. Carl is released from his double-bind because in this area Carl’s moral commitments overlap with those of the community: because the community has acted to discipline the teacher, Carl no longer feels the responsibility or burden.

It should be noted that, even though the two cultural ideals overlap in this instance, Carl still presents the teacher’s sexual behavior with students as something that is “just accepted in their culture.” Clearly, it is not wholly accepted, or the teacher would not have been punished. Carl, though destabilizing the White Man’s Burden, does not quite push it off its pedestal. He reverts back to hierarchies of nation that portray the Host Country as temporally behind America in standards of development, especially in regard to gender roles. Yet, at the same time, he has accomplished a slight disruption even in the act of questioning. That which is questionable is not natural, and that which is not natural may be unmade. Though outright destabilization of the White Man’s Burden imperative may not yet be reached, Carl’s questioning is a step in the right direction.

Reframe

In some instances in volunteer narratives, hegemonic power structures are not simply disrupted, but totally reframed in a different way. Chapter III—Making a Difference: The Politics of Knowledge and Learning in “Effective” Service—showed that narratives focusing simply on relationship, rather than proving that one’s experience was meaningful and made a difference, allow for more equality in the representations of volunteers and Host Country
Nationals. This reframing of the primary narrative produced detailed characters negotiating complicated situations in which there is no necessary right or wrong decision to be made.

This fundamental shift in the way of constructing a narrative of Peace Corps service also came out in my fieldwork. One particular volunteer, Rachel, conceptualized her experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in a Sub-Saharan African country as difficult because it forced her to reconsider her way of being in the world.

Well, okay, it was hard. Day-to-day hard. Ups and downs on a day-to-day basis. Just existing in a different world, and being someone that I wasn’t used to being. I feel like it was a different way of existing, and therefore a different way of being. And my personality had to be different, because I had to react differently to different situations. Especially like the little kids that come running up to your house. Right? And you can’t get mad at them when they don’t knock. And little things like that. And just like, somebody comes knocking on your door at 10 o’clock at night, and you’re like, “I’m asleep. How—how are you?” all cheerful. And not being offended when someone says, “Oh yeah, I’ll come over for tea tomorrow!” and doesn’t come. And different ways of being in town and saying hi to people, instead of just walking by. Just a different way of existing and interacting. And I liked it on a lot of levels, but on a lot of levels, it was exhausting. And I feel like it put me on edge, so like a little thing could make me so happy and excited, and another little thing could just be like, “What in the world is going on?!” So I think that was hard. But it has both extremes. Really cool and really not cool.

Rachel does not try to judge her experience in Sub-Saharan Africa hierarchically against the way that she lives in the United States. She treats the two countries as different worlds, and does not judge one by the standards of the other, but rather tries to examine her own state of being in each of the two worlds.

Rachel ignores the main narrative of empowerment that I had heard in volunteer narratives throughout my fieldwork and frames her experience as something entirely different. Her narrative becomes self-reflexive on her own way of being. At another point during the interview, she spent a few minutes describing how her community government had worked to install pipes and gain access to running water for the entire village over the two years that she
lived there. Rachel herself had nothing to do with the community water project; she didn’t help with it, she didn’t work on it, and no one asked her for advice. Yet, for Rachel, this was an important aspect of her experience in Sub-Saharan Africa that she wanted to relate to me.

The main thread in Rachel’s narrative of her experience as a Peace Corps volunteer was not about what she did. It was about what she saw—in herself and in the world around her. Though she spoke additionally about the high school where she taught and the library that she helped to organize, these tales were interspersed with reflections on her failings as a teacher, her friendships with her colleagues, and the amazing talent of the student running the library. The focus of the narrative was shifted away from Rachel’s accomplishments, and centered instead on observations and reflections. Rachel was able to describe the community’s successful water project without inserting herself into the narrative, because her narrative was not necessarily about her. Like “Itam” (Fearnside, 2008) and “Leave Taking” (Genovese, 2008), Rachel’s story allowed for characters other than herself to be intelligent and competent, and for complicated circumstances to stand.

**Conclusion**

This chapter argues that the Peace Corps experience of relationship to the Other is what ultimately allows for the disruption of hegemonic narratives, even as Peace Corps participates in reinscribing those same narratives. I showed how racial hegemony, national hegemony, and the imperative of the White Man’s Burden were momentarily disrupted in Peace Corps volunteer discourse. Finally, I briefly looked at one way that the narrative of Peace Corps service can be reframed and rethought of, in order to expunge the reinforcement of hegemony central to the main narrative. The question remaining to be addressed is how these disruptions open spaces for postcolonial re-imaginings, and what those re-imaginings might be.
Consider first the world that is opened if white skin is considered non-normative in the United States. Rather people of color—their ways of thinking, acting and dressing—become the normative American. Racial profiling could become a thing of the past. Men and women from the Middle East would not be a source of terror in the eyes of the conservative American. Perhaps if Black men were normative, and not suspicious, Trayvon Martin would not have been shot and killed.

If one were to re-imagine national hierarchies, the United States could be considered as having a similar or higher level of danger than anywhere else. This might lead to holding the U.S. responsible for violence it has perpetrated abroad, rather than constructing that violence as the fault of the invaded country where the U.S. was simply trying to ‘keep the peace’ (Cloud, 2004). And what if the domestic U.S. were opened up to scrutiny for the violence perpetrated therein? It could lead to destabilizing the ideological position of the U.S. as watchdog of the world, and the moral authority over other nations, a place which has been assumed without any necessary reason. Once the U.S. is put under the microscope, one could note that it is heavily violent as well. Though Americans talk about rape as if it is something that women have to be afraid of occurring outside the country, one in six women in the U.S. will be raped in her lifetime (RAINN, 2009) and one in four women who attend college will be raped (Sampson, 2002). Opening the U.S. up to scrutiny allows us to re-imagine not only national dynamics, but gendered power dynamics as well.

Rupturing the White Man’s Burden opens up the possibility of the Peace Corps as an organization that partners with other countries, in mutual benefit and mutual learning. If the impetus does not exist for the Peace Corps to fix another country, then it has the ability to ask what is needed in other countries, and to admit what the United States needs as well. Were this
hegemonic ideology to be dismantled, the United States would be able to not only celebrate its successes but to admit its failings. Rather than needing to present a front of stability and perfection in order that it may help others, the U.S. could admit its own issues and also ask for assistance in addressing them. Indeed, this dismantling of the White Man’s Burden connects to the way in which Rachel reframed her experience. As a partnership organization, the Peace Corps could be more about relating and being, than helping and fixing. Service becomes something that is both given, and accepted from others.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Postcolonial theory is seriously given to the idea that research and scholarship are acts of ethical engagement with the larger world in which we live. Hence, from the postcolonial perspective, research primarily tends to get judged in terms of its ethical/political effects and consequences. As a result, for the postcolonial scholar, research becomes a responsible response (to localized situations as well as to wider socio-cultural and political conditions); a response for which the researcher assumes responsibility. (Prasad & Prasad, 2003b, p. 113)

This thesis has attempted to enact a “responsible response” through its entire process, from data collection to this point of concluding the writing. I responded to the localized situation of American Peace Corps volunteers and their relationships to the people they lived and worked with overseas, because I wanted to see how Peace Corps volunteers construct narratives regarding themselves, their goals and accomplishments, and their way of relating to the Host Country Nationals around them. The primary goal of the research was to examine how the Peace Corps volunteer represented herself rather than how she represented the Other. Of course, the Other is necessarily implicated, and just as Prasad & Prasad (2003) hint at, this situation also heavily implicates larger political issues. Therefore, as a responsible postcolonial researcher, concerned with the way in which these narratives were constructed by—as well as served to (re)construct—hegemony, I traced the ideological threads of race, gender, nation, and the imperative to intervene in ‘Third World’ countries.

The first data analysis chapter, Chapter II, began by analyzing Peace Corps recruitment materials in order to reveal who ‘the volunteer’ is allowed or required to be. I argue that, though these pamphlets explicitly attempt to recruit racially diverse volunteers, in the process of doing so the normative volunteer is reinforced as white. Whiteness is normalized through different intersections of race, gender, and class, and ultimately serves a colonizing function in the
depiction of Host Country Nationals within the pamphlets. Though the chapter addresses intersecting power dynamics, to a great extent the focus is on whiteness. In Chapter IV, the initial focus on whiteness helps to create the basis needed to make a more detailed argument about race, gender, and nation.

Chapter III also helped to set the stage for Chapter IV. In Chapter III, I examine a book of returned Peace Corps volunteer stories, produced and published by Peace Corps to use in recruitment. The book is handed out to college students and other prospective volunteers in order to give them a taste of what the Peace Corps experience is ‘really like.’ The predominant underlying narrative of those stories was the notion of ‘making a difference,’ or how to have one’s service be ‘effective.’ These goals of effectiveness and difference-making require the Host Country Nationals to accept something American into their way of life, whether that be American knowledge that is taught to them, or the American volunteer himself. In the process of narrating how Americanness was accepted in their communities, volunteers dismissed or denigrated Host Country National knowledge. In addition, many of the narratives described how much the volunteer learned through her experience. The process of learning, then, seems contradictory to the dismissal of Host Country National knowledge. This paradox is avoided by the volunteer narrating how she learned abstract life lessons from the experience, rather than concrete lessons from the Host Country National. My main argument in this chapter was that centering an intercultural relationship, rather than the volunteer’s service, allows for Americentrism and imperialism to be destabilized and dismantled.

As the next chapter focused on empowerment, this idea of the Host Country National as not having concrete knowledge becomes important. The paternalistic view of ‘developing’ countries seen in Chapter III constructs a basis for neocolonialism. The Host Country National is
presented as needing the American knowledge and help that they accept. In Chapter IV, this is conceptualized as ‘empowerment.’ This chapter was based on interviews and participant observation with both returned and prospective Peace Corps volunteers. The narrative of ‘empowerment’ was woven through various conversations and situated narrative constructions. I argue that in order to ‘empower’ others, the volunteer must enact a certain intersection nation, race, and gender. I argue that the White Man’s Burden truly is both white and masculine; in order for a volunteer to access the American exceptionalism necessary to be able to empower others, they must enact both whiteness and masculinity. The assumption underlying ‘empowerment’ is two-fold: that the Host Country National needs to be empowered and cannot do it on their own, and that the American volunteer has the power to empower others. This two-fold assumption is clearly neocolonial; it is based on an ideology of U.S. supremacy, as well as the imperative of the White Man’s Burden to assist the ‘savages’ in ‘development.’ Yet, the White Man’s Burden itself is also constructed meaningfully.

Chapter II had already given a basis for understanding how normative whiteness is involved even in the process of recruitment; it’s no wonder that (white) Peace Corps volunteer assume the white volunteer experience to be generalizable in situated conversation, as well. However, whiteness and other racial formations (Omi & Winant, 1994) are slippery, changing form in order to hold its position of hegemony, and even volunteers attempting to be critically aware of the assumptions that they are making can fall into its trap. When the generalizability of whiteness is challenged, the volunteer narrative becomes muddled by the contradiction.

The threads running throughout the rest of the thesis are tied together in Chapter IV. In Chapter V, the strength of these ideological threads is tested. Chapter V examines places where the primary narrative of Chapter IV—empowerment, and who has the power to empower—is
ruptured or reframed. This chapter begins to question how the hegemonic narrative of U.S. benevolence and ultimately neocolonialism could be challenged. Examining key moments where the narrative is ruptured in different ways, I show how the script can be flipped, decentering whiteness, the United States, and the imperative to assist. I argue the Peace Corps experience itself creates the opportunity for rupture.

In both Chapters III and V, I show how a counternarrative is produced based on relationship and being. Rather than narratively rationalizing one’s service through the tropes of ‘making a difference,’ ‘being effective,’ or ‘empowering,’ these counternarratives simply emphasize relationship, being, and reflecting. Without the pressure to prove through the narrative how and why one’s service was effective, the volunteer narrative is opened to new realms of possibility. In Chapter III, the two stories exhibiting the counternarrative characterize the Host Country National in a much different manner than the other stories. By centering the relationship between the volunteer and the Host Country National, rather than one culture or the other, mutuality and relationship are emphasized. Additionally, Americentrism and imperialism are ruptured. The Host Country Nationals are recognized as intelligent individuals with detailed personalities. Both of these stories inhabit a shorter timespan than the other stories in the book, which allows for a more detailed focus on description, reflection, and examination of complex circumstances.

Though other ways of de-centering American and Western ways of knowing have been put forth by scholars, they are heavily based on race and ethnicity; Afrocentricity (Asante 1988, 1998, 2008) and Asiacentricity (Miike 2007, 2008, 2010) require an intimate understanding of the African and Asian experience, something which is very difficult for a someone of differing racial, national, or ethnic backgrounds to achieve. In fact, such a bounded means of de-centering
American ontologies and epistemologies may “end up excluding perspectives and populations (including those within the U.S.) whose racial becoming straddles multiple (and colliding) geographies and trajectories” (Shome, 2010, p. 150). Thus, the conceptualization put forth in Chapter III of centering the intercultural relationship as a means to destabilizing Americentrism contributes helpfully to postcolonial theory.

Chapter V gives an example of reflecting on the act of being. The volunteer quoted reflects on how she felt her way of being and acting had to shift in her new context, and how that was both a challenging and rewarding experience. This alternative conceptualization of Peace Corps service, as a shift in one’s way of being, is not seen in any of the other narratives constructed. Rather, volunteers consider only their circumstances changing—the people are different than the U.S., the culture is different than the U.S.—without considering ways in which they might shift in different circumstances.

All told, this thesis examines an international organization whose members, for the most part, consider themselves to be doing good in the world, and have a desire to do good in the world, and reveals the underlying neocoloniality of their own self-conceptualizations. However, that does not imply that the Peace Corps volunteer is inherently neocolonial. There are ways of narrating the self in relationship to Host Country National Other which do not necessitate nationed, raced, or gendered hierarchies.

Yet, the reframing of neocolonial narratives, as far as this thesis takes it, is only found on the individual level. What does that mean for Peace Corps as an organization? Peace Corps, though it is an organization of over 9,000 volunteers, ultimately is enacted individual by individual. Volunteers spend the first three months of their experience in groups of 40-60, training together. However, after those first three months, the volunteer becomes the lone
American within a city, town, or village. During this time, the enactment of the organization’s mission depends entirely on the individual. Peace Corps, because of this non-traditional form of organizing, allows for a greater ability to destabilize neocolonial and imperial narratives. The individual volunteer is forced to ‘be’ in a different way. Perhaps if volunteers were encouraged to view their experiences as causing radical change in their own way of being, rather than causing radical change in the Host Country National community where they reside, the narratives emerging about Peace Corps would be less paternalistic, and more self-reflective.

Maldonado-Torres (2007), a philosopher of ethnic studies, argues that there is an ontological form of coloniality, a “coloniality of being” (p. 240). Put simply, colonial history has created conditions in which some people ‘are’ and others ‘are not.’ However, Maldonado-Torres argues that this is not a natural, but constructed, state. Working from the work of W.E.B. DuBois, Maldonado-Torres argues that de-colonizing being “demands responsibility and the willingness to take many perspectives, particularly the perspectives and points of view of those whose very existence is questioned and produced as insignificant” (p. 262). The counternarratives revealed in discourse of Peace Corps volunteer experience are taking beginning steps toward ontological de-coloniality. The narratives have not reached a point yet where they are fully attempting to engage with Host Country National experience in the lived moment, but are at least questioning the notion that there is only one way of being, and starting to shift perspective. A space has been opened for self-reflexivity and critical consciousness. With greater self-reflexivity, perhaps Peace Corps be an organization truly dedicated to partnership and mutual assistance, rather than service and beneficence.

As a postcolonial work, this Master’s thesis has examined narrative constructed by returned Peace Corps volunteers in order to critique the underlying dynamics of race, gender,
class, and nation, and to theorize ways in which relationships between and representations of the volunteer and Host Country National Other could be constructed in a more equitable and just manner. This piece answers calls for postcolonial (Hegde, 1998; Shome, 2003; Shome, 2006; Shome & Hedge, 2002a; Shome & Hegde, 2002b) and decolonial work (Broadfoot, Munshi, & Nelson-Marsh, 2010; Chawla and Rodriguez, 2011; Nkomo, 2011; Norander & Harter, 2012) in the field of communication.
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