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## **IN WHOSE WORDS? NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER STORIES FROM AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The theoretical inspiration for this paper has come from anthropological conceptualizations of personal narrative and the relationship between the notions of travel, culture, and reciprocity. I consider this in relation to the construction of cultural meaning by volunteers through the medium of the Internet. The present analysis primarily focuses on how volunteers attempt to create coherent narratives of their own volunteering and make their experience of places and "cross-cultural links" (Clifford 1997) meaningful. The organization of themes in this paper reflects the authors concern about a holistic anthropological approach to the research of volunteering.

Keywords: volunteering, personal narrative, Internet, computer-mediated communication

### **Part I: Introduction**

In spite of the fact that research on volunteering is gaining momentum, evidenced in a growing body of data found in national surveys of volunteering activity (Hall et al. 2001; Davis Smith 2000) as well as in interdisciplinary studies published in journals on voluntary action (published by institutes researching various aspects of volunteerism, such as Institute for Volunteering Research, UK), research into volunteering has not yet been explored in any depth from an anthropological perspective. The cultural aspects of volunteering have not been thoroughly researched, given that volunteerism has been analytically approached from a religious perspective and at the same time viewed primarily as an economic and not

a cultural phenomenon (Roy and Ziemek 2001; Baker 1996; Clark 1991). Moreover, little significant writing focuses on volunteering from the perspective of the volunteers themselves.

This paper will explore the perspective of volunteers and cultural aspects of volunteering by focusing on personal narratives written by volunteers themselves and published on the Internet in the form of "volunteer stories".

There is still no clear cut definition of the term 'volunteering'. Discussions of volunteering are confined to activities carried out by Westerners (Lukka and Ellis 2002; Sheard 1995; Handy et al. 2000), which is in large part due to the fact that although volunteering is increasingly recognized as socially and culturally specific (as it represents different things to different people, depending on their social, cultural, political positions), it is primarily a Western construct, with strong religious underpinnings, which invariably suggests a service delivery model of "doing good" (Lukka and Ellis 2002; Sheard 1995). The notion of altruism or "a spirit of service" is deeply embedded in the broad definition of volunteering, which implies not only working or assisting others for little or no financial compensation, but also that it doesn't have to do with doing good deeds for material reward (or even not necessarily for recognition and praise) but with doing good for the sake of it.<sup>1</sup> Later on in this paper, I explore how the notion of altruism is connected to the notion of reciprocity which is in turn related to self-interest, all of which need to be when discussing the complexity of the humanitarian impulse that leads volunteers to serve (Smillie 1995:27-28).

From an historical point of view, volunteering can be understood as a consequence of the organizational response to destruction following World War II, which gave rise to the notion of development itself. It was in the 1960s, when industrialized countries began to found volunteer agencies whose task it was to send (young) people overseas to work with "the poor", that volunteering emerged as an institutionalized form of development work (Gilette 2001). Britain's Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) was founded in 1957, and the Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) was established in 1960, under the motto to "serve and learn" (CUSO website),<sup>2</sup> and larger scale institutionalization of volunteers came in the form of American Peace Corps set up by President J. F. Kennedy's government in 1961 (Peace Corps website).<sup>3</sup> In the decades that followed, European countries (led by Germany and Scandinavian countries), as well as Japan, established private or non-governmental organizations to send volunteers overseas, and it was in 1970 that United Nations Volunteers, (a

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<sup>1</sup> Chambers (1997:13) defines altruism as "a fact of human behaviour" that "can be chosen", adding, in his anthropological argument, that "no one is immune from altruism."

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cuso.org>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.peacecorps.gov/indexf.cfm>

UN agency), was established as part of the United Nations Development Programme (UNV website).<sup>4</sup>

It is true that Northern volunteer organizations were the result of setting up a practical modality of distributing aid resources, money and technical assistance, but they were partially established in order to protect national interests and ensure political control. It is for this reason that certain insights to be gained from Michel Foucault's analysis of power are important to take into consideration.

It would be incorrect to assume that volunteers – the authors of volunteer stories – from the countries of the 'North' (specifically here the U.S.) naively support so-called "development elites" (United Nations Volunteer Programme 2001:4), who are often attacked by anti-development critics for imposing their will of the politically and economically powerful on the "poor and downtrodden" of the 'South'. However, the literature and the organizations' websites show that volunteers, often fall into what Foucault would define as "local cynicism of power". They on the one hand, define themselves as outside and even against the establishment of the "development elites" (United Nations Volunteer Programme 2001:4). On the other hand, they take active part in the attempt to liberate the poor without their participation. That is to say, they contribute to what could be described as the "Othering" of the 'South' that begins with the patronizing portrayal of "overseas" communities as implicitly in need of aid and unable to help themselves. As Escobar (1984, 1995) suggests, this framing of the Other has become part of the systematization of relationships that created the Third World as an entity in dire need of help. Though this relationship was created with a non-profit or humanistic motivation, its effects were not much different from that created by a for-profit capital formation motivation (Wittel 1999:5).

In the 1980s and especially throughout the 1990s, voluntary organizations strove to escape this framing of the "Other" by becoming more people-centered and began to look for and support more indigenous social movements (CUSO 1997). In practice, this means that unlike before 1990s, when little emphasis was placed on language skills and cultural adaptation of volunteers, volunteers are nowadays trained for "cultural sensitivity" through intensive language training and cultural orientation before their posting. The need for "cultural sensitivity", as a tool against the "Othering" of the South, is also apparent in the rhetoric put out by voluntary agencies, where the idea that volunteers will learn much from the South and from the community in which they will be working is being promoted. The language of volunteering resonates with the analysis of discourse in the Foucauldian sense, meaning the systematized structure of what is said, discussed, and named in a field of work, wherein power and

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org>

knowledge are joined together (Escobar 1984:379).<sup>5</sup> These organizations claim "that local people are the experts and know what is best for their communities" (Cross-Cultural Solutions' website)<sup>6</sup> and that by joining their programs, volunteers will help them achieve their "mission to empower communities, foster cultural sensitivity and understanding, and further social progress", which will, in turn, prove to be one of "the most exciting, thought-provoking and enriching experiences" for volunteers themselves (Cross-Cultural Solutions' website).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, little is explicitly stated about what volunteers will learn beyond a generalized appreciation of foreign people in a foreign place. I argue that the organizations are engaging in this rhetoric in order to attract potential recruits. The rhetoric is later on reflected in the language used in volunteer stories for reasons that will be further discussed in Part III.

Organizations that today send volunteers overseas to "see the world with a purpose",<sup>8</sup> namely the United Nations Volunteers, U.S. Peace Corps, Global Volunteers, and Cross-Cultural Solutions, have a large volunteer base, and have taken a strategic approach to using the Internet, which is, among other things, manifested in their online volunteer recruitment. As part of that recruitment, the organizations invite returned volunteers to write about their experiences abroad (mostly in non-Western countries) and to publish their stories on the organizations' web-sites. I argue that narratives as they appear in the form that I am examining – volunteer stories posted on the website of a large organization such as the Peace Corps – are carefully selected and deliberately processed by those who display them with public image and recruitment efforts of these organizations in mind in order to encourage a specific 'flavor' of volunteer experience.

U.S. Peace Corps and its website on the Internet stand out as a productive site for analysis, not just due to the organization's enormous size (reflected in the large number of its overseas volunteer stories) but also owing to its unique position in the field of volunteerism. Unlike any other volunteer placement organization, the Peace Corps is part of the U.S. Government, which, in turn, means that its volunteers are employees of the U.S. Government. Moreover, unlike diverse volunteer profiles in other international volunteer organizations, Peace Corps volunteers – all American citizens – are predominantly young, white and come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (Collins et al. 2002). The image of

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<sup>5</sup> CUSO has changed its discourse to such an extent that they no longer call people they recruit "volunteers" but "cooperants," while locals employed as field staff are called "partners" who work alongside cooperants (CUSO 1997).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org/index.cfm?siteID=Internet:WebUser>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org/index.cfm?siteID=Internet:WebUser>

<sup>8</sup> The words 'international' and 'overseas' are used interchangeably in this research. I therefore talk about international/overseas volunteering; international/overseas volunteers; international/overseas volunteer stories; international/overseas volunteer organizations.

the "volunteer as savior" – the young, white American volunteer living in a mud hut in an isolated village helping poor local people in need – is continuously promoted by the Peace Corps through its discursive practices and the use of photographs both on its homepage on the Internet as well as in hundreds of various publications that it has issued since the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> This paper examines whether this image influenced the volunteers' descriptions of learning about and living with other people and cultures.

## **Part II: Literature review – theoretical framework**

How do people account for their own engagement in international volunteer activity? How is their volunteering experience, which links people to different places and 'life-worlds' (Eastmond 1996:233), understood and integrated in their individual lives (if it is at all)?

Anthropology has always been concerned with documenting individual lives over time as a means to understanding society. Narratives of personal experience are a common data collection strategy, usually integrated in wider ethnographic analysis. The literature on narrative is vast, and the precise definition of personal narrative is a subject of debate. As a starting point, it can be said that it refers to talk organized around consequential events: a narrator (a writer of a volunteer story) takes a listener (a reader/anthropologist) into a past time or "world" and recapitulates what happened to make a point, frequently a moral one (Riessman 1993:3).

It is through narrative that a sense of fragmentation as well as temporal and spatial dislocation is transformed to offer coherence. Following Lévi-Strauss who said that myths should be understood as "machines for the suppression of the sense of passing time and space" (in Rapport 2000:76), Rapport uses Lévi-Strauss's 'mythemes' and offers 'nar-themes' – narrative themes – where 'myth' is operating on the level of the individual self. I will use Rapport's idea of 'nar-themes' to illuminate the method of volunteers' narrative of their volunteering experience and of self. Volunteers maintain and rehearse what Rapport calls a 'personal myth' which serves to suppress the temporal and spatial distances between their volunteering time and their time upon return to the home country (the U.S.). Their narrative contains personal 'nar-themes' which recur in partial, complete or variant form, as volunteers seek resolution of problems of meaning within that space. In Part III I analyze a number of such 'nar-themes' (culture/culture shock; travel; reciprocity, etc.). Although they can sometimes be exemplified by isolated statements, nar-themes must always be gleaned from a contextual analysis of these statements.

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<sup>9</sup> For an extensive list of books about the Peace Corps see <http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/facts/books.html>.

Culture, the word perhaps most often used in the volunteer rhetoric, can be seen as nothing more and nothing less, in the volunteers' "space on the side of the road," than "what people say." (Stewart 1996). A rich and complex conception of culture in the Geertzian sense is represented in volunteer stories as they talk about "journeying through the looking glass of culture," describe the process of "culture adaptation" to unfamiliar environments, and emphasize "culture shock" as "the shock of self-discovery" (Shames 1997:16).<sup>10</sup>

James Clifford in "Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century" (1997) explores how culture as a process is interconnected with the relevance of travel. Clifford views traveling (and, more specifically, tourism) as one manifestation of a global trend toward ever-expanding modes of human displacement (Chambers 2000). Displacement, forced and voluntary, exists, says Clifford, in an always-unresolved dialectic with different forms of dwelling, of staying put. This dialectic also emerges from 'overseas' volunteer stories as identity is being founded on imaginary trajectories of "here and there", "I and not-I", in metaphors of movement and place (Curtis et al. 1994). These metaphors constitute the narrative of volunteers who work overseas with members of foreign communities as a traveling narrative, a narrative of space and difference. Volunteering in this sense may not necessarily "broaden the mind", but it does provide new ways of seeing and being. 'New ways of seeing and being' are what Mary Helms (1988, in Chambers 2000) refers to when she suggests that it is the quest for knowledge of other places that underlies a human propensity for travel. She maintains that human groups have always prized and sought to obtain the spiritual and secular knowledge that lies beyond the borders of their own societies and that travel has long been valued as the means to that knowledge. This is precisely how travel is presented in the volunteer stories: volunteers refuse to see themselves as 'mere' tourists, and their rhetoric is an attempt to secure a 'superior' traveling status as they show a particular fascination in the 'real lives of others'.

Volunteers claim that the 'real lives of others' are accessed through the practice of reciprocity. One of the most popular metaphorical descriptions of volunteering is 'a gift of time' (Hanna 1999) or 'a gift of giving'.<sup>11</sup> To paraphrase Mary Douglas (in Foreword to Mauss 1990:vii), volunteering is, in theory, meant to be a free gift, a voluntary, unrequited surrender of resources. However, the literature (e.g. Davis Smith 1998; Collins et al. 2002) shows that in giving time volunteers count on certain returns – they expect to meet new friends, learn new skills, gain confidence

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'culture shock' was coined by an anthropologist, Kalervo Oberg, in a short descriptive article based on his personal observations of expatriate Americans (Oberg 1960). Oberg likened culture shock to an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad. Some people make a good recovery and rapidly adjust to the new environment; in others, the condition can become chronic and debilitating.

<sup>11</sup> <http://seniors-site.com/retiremt/volunter.html>

and self-respect, and they generally expect volunteering to bring them personal satisfaction.<sup>12</sup>

Anthropological research around gift-giving and reciprocity goes back to Marcel Mauss and his comparative study of the institution of the gift *Essai sur le Don*. Mauss's work is especially important to beginning an anthropological assessment of the practices and logics of volunteering in general and volunteer stories in particular since it resonates with the issues that 'time-as-gift giving' raises within the volunteering community.<sup>13</sup> Mauss argued that each gift is part of a system of reciprocity in which the honor of giver and recipient are engaged. Every gift has to be returned in some specified way, since the unreciprocated gift makes the person who has received it somehow inferior. Volunteer stories show that the donor (volunteer) is never exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient in various ways, shapes and forms. "Being trustworthy, a good citizen, pays off when your wider community knows about your good works and reciprocates by supporting you" (Hanna 1999), claim the volunteers. But the concept of gift-giving also potentially carries motives of power and authority, after all. I argue that volunteers and their respective volunteer organizations often engage in this reciprocity talk in order to challenge a stereotype they are aware of: the derogatory stereotype of 'middle-class-do-gooder' (Hanna 1999) or 'selfish altruist' (Vaux 2001) who helps others when they can't reciprocate, puts them into debt, sets up a relationship of inequality and ultimately robs the recipient of self-respect using altruism as a form of social oppression.

### **Part III: Virtual ethnography and description analysis of "volunteer voices"**

Exploring volunteer stories on the Internet, whose 'travel-writing' content implies multi-locality, and whose location invites the practice of virtual ethnography, suggests that 'doing fieldwork' in this case cannot be based on the idea of locality. A strategy used in this paper to overcome a traditional concept of fieldwork can be viewed as a shift from material spaces to so-called cyberspace<sup>14</sup> (Wittel 1999). Hine (2000) reminds us of an important methodological fact about volunteer stories in cyberspace:

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<sup>12</sup> In one study in the UK volunteering was identified as the second greatest source of joy behind dancing (Argyle 1996).

<sup>13</sup> To name a few; issues concerning giving work and not receiving payment; the bonds created through giving; creating emotional ties/obligations through giving; and giving as charity (Heller 2002).

<sup>14</sup> "This term, borrowed from science fiction, is used to refer to the notional space which one "inhabits" when one logs on to a computer. Cyberspace is the set of spatial metaphors underlying notions like "surfing the World Wide Web," etc. Often, however, the term "cyberspace" points more broadly toward the distinctly different "patterns of and for behavior" or way of life believed to arise around use of computers, the cyberculture produced by an alleged "computer revolution" (Hakken 2000:173).

the reader/anthropologist cannot ask authors to clarify what they mean which, in turn, means that "the focus in consuming texts is therefore placed far more on the interpretative work done by readers and less on a shared understanding between authors and readers" (Hine 2000:50).

The venue for volunteer stories examined here are the homepages of volunteer organizations. The sites usually have a posted policy that establishes specific expectations (for example, a statement notifying users that the site is public). Having read the posted policies of all the researched organizations, I have decided to treat volunteer stories the same way I treat other publications on the Internet. I follow statements and guidelines offered by the AAA Code of Ethics regarding references retrieved as Internet documents. I have written several times to the Peace Corps about my interest in their organization and the stories, but have still received no reply. Nevertheless, since the Peace Corps volunteer stories posted on the Internet are in the public domain, the approach I have taken is ethically sound.

The Peace Corps volunteer stories are found under "What is it like to volunteer" section of the Peace Corps homepage. This section offers the possibility to "spend five minutes with a Peace Corps Volunteer" and "learn more than you ever thought you would". One is invited to read an interview with a current volunteer answering questions such as "What is your most memorable experience as a Volunteer?" or "What made you decide to join the Peace Corps?"; watch volunteers answer some of the most frequently asked questions in video; explore "Insider's View Photo Galleries" – photo galleries to "see what it's really like"; read accounts titled "A Day in the Life" of one day in the life of a volunteer. The stories are referred to as the "In their Own Words" section<sup>15</sup> and they are accessed through a search engine that can be used "to find a story that meets your interests".<sup>16</sup> On March 17, 2004, when I last checked the database, there were 118 stories submitted.<sup>17</sup> The stories are listed according to country (in alphabetical order, starting with Armenia and ending with Zimbabwe) in which the volunteering described took place. Titles of stories are given, as well as full names of their authors/returned volunteers. The actual content of the stories is accessed by clicking on the title of the stories. When the story appears on the page, we also learn when the experience took place – the period that the volunteer is describing is specified next to

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<sup>15</sup> Which is why I also refer to them in this paper as "In Their Own Words" stories.

<sup>16</sup> Search parameters include work areas, region or country, home state, age, gender, ethnicity, and college discipline. One can also just click "submit" and browse the entire extensive database of stories from former volunteers. The majority of stories can also be found listed under "Short works about the Peace Corps experience" on another Peace Corps website, namely that of the so-called "PeaceCorpsWriters.org": *RPCV* (Returned Peace Corps Volunteers) *Writers and Readers* newsletter.

<sup>17</sup> According to the Peace Corps assessment, sixty eight were written by women, 50 by men, 60 by white (not of Hispanic origin) volunteers, 15 by Black, 7 Hispanic, 8 Asian or Pacific Islander, 1 American Indian or Alaskan Native volunteer.



the title of the story (it is almost always impossible to tell when the story was actually written). The story ends with the first and last names of its author, as well as his or her current employment and level of education information. Stories vary in length, but are usually not longer than 1,200 words.

I argue that the Peace Corps invites volunteers to publish their stories because this is one way to attract potential recruits. The stories' almost always positive outlook on volunteering, and also, more conspicuously, the format of certain stories, where the voice of the volunteer is only occasionally heard through the editor's summarized description of his or her work<sup>18</sup> suggest that the stories are subject to the editorial process before they are published. If this is true (of which, unfortunately I have no substantial evidence since the Peace Corps has never replied to my repeated emails about the subject), potential authors who fail to publish their stories therefore cannot be included in my analysis.<sup>19</sup>

The "In Their Own Words" stories could be divided into two groups: stories that recount the volunteer's entire Peace Corps volunteering experience and stories that primarily focus on one serious and momentous event/situation/issue from volunteering life. In terms of their temporal organization, volunteer stories are most often written in past tense and it is frequently impossible to precisely determine how much time had elapsed between the actual volunteering and the writing of the story. The beginnings or opening sentences are the foundation upon which this temporal organization is based. The volunteers start their narration by employing well-known formulas such as "It was a hot dusty afternoon in late August".<sup>20</sup> This reminds us of the fact that several criteria (followed by most discourse analysts) should be applied to volunteer stories. The first such criterion is their overall organization: It is important to examine conventional categories that appear in their specific type of writing (such as encouraging future volunteers to engage in voluntary action) or formulas, like the one quoted above, being used when opening or closing the story. One such element to be explored is the stories' titles.

The titles of volunteer stories convey much information about their respective stories, and they are especially important for my research since they function as clues to 'nar-themes' central to the story. Very frequently the title suggests that the story will be about "crossing cultural boundaries"

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<sup>18</sup> In other words, about a third of the stories are not 'stories'; they are the so-called Profiles (I found 39 Profile out of 118 stories). The volunteering experience is being described from the point of view of the volunteer, but the volunteer is not the narrator; he or she answers questions asked by an interviewer.

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<sup>20</sup> Orin Hargraves, "Neighbors", Morocco 1980-1982.

and "linking geographical places".<sup>21</sup> Similarly, titles often let the reader know about the precise location of volunteering.<sup>22</sup> The title of a volunteer story can explicitly state that the story will deal with a single day in a life of the author that was either representative or uncharacteristic of the author's volunteering experience.<sup>23</sup> The title can also be a proverbial formula<sup>24</sup> or an abstract, poetic concept<sup>25</sup> that often describes the rewards of volunteering.<sup>26</sup> The title oftentimes suggests that the story will deal with the volunteer/author's work assignment<sup>27</sup> or it announces that the story will be about one particular local person that had specific influence on the volunteer's experience of volunteering.<sup>28</sup> As I have already pointed out, the titles of volunteer stories are closely linked to the question of 'nar-themes'. Before I can isolate a number of 'nar-themes' it is necessary to examine the overall organization of the stories and provide a more general descriptive analysis of the stories as a whole:

The stories that delve into prolonged accounts of the volunteering experience (starting with the decision to apply and ending with the volunteer's departure from the country where he or she volunteered) usually begin with a description of or an allusion to the application process, reactions (shock, surprise) of the volunteer's family and friends when the possibility of volunteering for the Peace Corps was brought up, as well as descriptions of the volunteer's roots.

Growing up in Hawaii, I was always surrounded by varying cultures and languages (...). As an African American woman, I was different from everyone around me and considered this normal. I grew up experiencing and appreciating ethnic diversity, cultural exchange, and religious differences. This multi-cultural, multi-lingual setting was the foundation for my pursuing the Peace Corps.<sup>29</sup>

The first arrival to the country where one will volunteer, is an event often described in great detail, followed by a description of the volunteer's worries about his or her inability to perform the assigned task adequately.

I walked down the road, hoping I would reach my destination. Please, I thought, half seriously, half jokingly, let me be hit by a car and than I'll never have to face them. Despite ten weeks of intensive preparation

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<sup>21</sup> "From Hawaii to Benin", "From a Ghetto Brownstone to a Jungle Brown Hut", "From Leningrad to Budapest", "The Brown American who lived in a Ger".

<sup>22</sup> "Canaan Village", "Under the Tongan Sun", "The Cotton Trenches of Uzbekistan"; "Fishing in Sierra Leone".

<sup>23</sup> "Not just any other day"; "A Day in Papua Guinea", "First Day", etc.

<sup>24</sup> "All It Takes is Time", "Everyone Everywhere Has Tales to Tell", "Rich and Poor"; "Development is Down This Road"; "May the Circle Be Unbroken"; "Shades of Grey".

<sup>25</sup> "The Rhythm of Women"; "A Single Lucid Moment", etc.

<sup>26</sup> "A Taste of Success"; "Reasons for Joy"; "Abundant Rewards".

<sup>27</sup> "The Joy of Digging"; "To Peel Potatoes"; "Wood-looking".

<sup>28</sup> "That Rascal, Melvin", "My Elvis", "Mariama".

<sup>29</sup> Dana Miller, "From Hawaii to Benin", Benin 1997-1999.

in Senegal and a master's degree with a year's preparation in the States before that, I knew that I was not ready. (...) Why did I ever think I wanted to do this? I wondered. The students lined up and marched into the classroom. There were forty of them, half boys and half girls. They sat quietly and expectantly, waiting to see what their American teacher would be like.<sup>30</sup>

Lengthy descriptions of "majestic" local geography take up many a paragraph. "Starkly beautiful" landscape is often poetically described, and special attention is paid to the 'exotic' flora and fauna.

Herds of African cattle with elegant long white horns strolled together across land dotted with huge baobab trees. As we traveled east, the color of the majestic mesas, little mountains of wind-carved rock, changed from hues of deep red-orange to light pink.<sup>31</sup>

Volunteers' marvel at the "majestic" local geography often contrasted with descriptions of problems or feelings of anxiety caused by culture shock. They characteristically describe the process of adjusting or getting used to behavior of the local people which annoys, confuses or otherwise unsettles them, and they also talk about how they tried to adjust their own behavior, to the best of their ability, so that it would not do the same with the local people. Volunteers describe the problems they encountered trying to adjust to the new climate and the new language. They also talk about difficulties they had finding their way around, problems concerning poor communication (being unable to contact their relatives and friend's in the U.S is a common sub-nar-theme), poor transportation, problems concerning "having to do without", the threat of getting sick, etc. They often treat the problems with self-irony, describing their own reactions and fears as "silly", "American", "Western".

The air felt like warm water filling our lungs as we pedaled our way along the railroad tracks, past the bustling crowds, with the oceans of children yelling "tubabu" (white person), and the random herds of goats, cows, and the occasional camel. (...) I was deluged by a huge wave of kids (...). They all surrounded me, yelling "tubabu," touching my skin, and asking me questions. I was not in the mood. Then suddenly, one girl ran up behind me and smacked me on the rear! Almost immediately after that, a man who was passing by grabbed the back of my bike and shook it violently for no apparent reason. I gawked at him with big eyes and gaping mouth.<sup>32</sup>

The uncomfortable experience of culture shock is in turn contrasted (usually in the second part of the story) with amazement with local sincerity and generosity. This is where the issue of reciprocity is often raised – the idea that volunteers donate their time only to receive

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<sup>30</sup> Susan Rosenfeld, "First Day", Senegal 1977-1981.

<sup>31</sup> Deborah Ball, "Trekking to the Sahara", Niger 1992-1994.

<sup>32</sup> Theresa Lawhon, "Going Home", Burkina Faso 1998-2000.

something "much more valuable" in return: the bonds, emotional ties created through giving.

"How much do I owe you?" The reply I received was also standard. "Nothing. Just your thanks." (...)What is it with all of these people who are so kind and do so much for me, but never accept any payment or ask for anything in return? Is it because I'm the gringa, an outsider, and they want to give a good impression of their people and their country? Do they intend to create that good impression by treating me extra special? That's what I thought at first, but with time I realized that I'd been mistaken. (...) It's just the way they are. I hope that this generosity, this sense of community, is something I'll be able to take back with me.<sup>33</sup>

Similar amazement can be read from volunteers' accounts dealing primarily with the story of one individual local person who becomes "a best friend" and is eventually regarded as a "teacher", "a remarkable human being".

Amayi Makawa stepped out from the circle and trotted toward us with her right hand extended for a handshake and the other hand lightly touching her elbow as a sign of respect. But she did not drop to one knee and bow her head as the other women in the village did when speaking to men and educated women. Her head was always held high. "Muli Bwanji! (How are you)" she chimed, shaking my hand in a powerful grip.<sup>34</sup>

It is those particular local people that primarily (but not exclusively) make the volunteer feel 'at home' in the foreign country.

"Okay," she said. "Are you ready to go home now?" I had a fleeting vision of cool Maine evenings, feasts of pizza, and enormous stuffed couches – then I realized that she meant the host families' house. I grudgingly agreed. (...) Suddenly, the wind picked up and the sky filled with monstrous black clouds. (...)I turned my face to the sky and one giant raindrop fell on my cheek. I laughed out loud. (...) My smile got even wider. Everything was going to be all right. I was going home.<sup>35</sup>

Similar to beginnings and opening paragraphs, the stories' endings and closing paragraphs frequently rely on certain formulas. Examples such as "And so life goes on"<sup>36</sup> or "It's been another day of death and life"<sup>37</sup> are representative of final statements or closing sentences found in volunteer narratives. Similarly, closing paragraphs are time and again venues for summaries of "lessons" learned abroad.

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<sup>33</sup> Larissa Zoot, "Goods and Services", Honduras 1993-1995.

<sup>34</sup> Tanya Elders, "Amayi Makawa", Malawi 1997-1999.

<sup>35</sup> Theresa Lawhon, "Going Home", Burkina Faso 1998-2000.

<sup>36</sup> Beatrice Gabrish, "The Cotton Trenches of Uzbekistan", Uzbekistan, 1992-1994.

<sup>37</sup> Jacqueline Gold, "Death and Life in the Peace Corps", Cameroon, 1987-1989.

The rush of pride and sense of awareness I shared with the women that afternoon comes back to me at different times during my life today. I think of it when I need a reminder of how human beings everywhere contribute each day to the well-being of our world. This happens whether we are recognized for it or not. This lesson is one of the many gifts given to me while I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Dominican Republic.<sup>38</sup>

In comparing volunteers' different utterances, at least 13 regularly recurring themes can be isolated. These are as follows:

- 1) Volunteer reflects upon the application and training process
- 2) Volunteer's recollections of family and friends' reactions upon finding out about that the volunteer is going into the Peace Corps
- 3) Volunteer reflects on his or her roots/background
- 4) Volunteer describes his or her arrival to the country of volunteering
- 5) Volunteer talks about the assignment/history of work – worries about his or her skills required to perform the assigned task
- 6) Volunteer's description of the location of his or her assignment; amazement by the country's geography.
- 7) Volunteer talks about the political situation in the country/region.
- 8) Volunteer provides examples for the experience of culture shock
- 9) Volunteer describes the bonds created with the locals, the emphasis is placed on reciprocity
- 10) Volunteer's detailed account of his or her special relationship (friendship) with one particular local person.
- 11) Volunteer talks about the concept of 'home'
- 12) Volunteer describes his or her departure from the country
- 13) Volunteer summarizes lessons learned overseas

Most of these themes appear in every story, and the appearance of each varies in terms of length and complexity of treatment. Themes expand and interweave as the narrative of volunteers' personal experience "documents a sequence of events that have entered into the biography" of its authors (Labov 1997:4). This reported sequence of events attests to the volunteers' quest for authenticity (to paraphrase Urry's "The Tourist Gaze") in which they are 'contemporary pilgrims,' seeking authenticity not necessarily in other 'times,' but certainly in other 'places,' away from those of their everyday lives. The nar-themes show that in doing so, volunteers undergo several 'rites of passages'. The first is the social and spatial separation from their normal place of residence (family and friends), reflected in the stories by themes 1 through 3 and partially theme 4. It is during this phase that their travel desire manifests itself directly, as an interlude into the 'real' trip (it starts, with researching the destination prior

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<sup>38</sup> Dianne Garyantes, "Not Just Any Other Day", Dominican Republic 1989-1991.

to departure, reading the Peace Corps brochures, learning the basics of the foreign language as part of the Peace Corps training, etc.). The second stage is the one where the traveling volunteer finds him/herself in an "anti-structure... out of time and place" (Turner in Urry 1992:10). Marked by themes 4 through 6, and most prominently theme 8, this stage, however, has several sub-stages or phases. The first phase is the one in which high adrenaline still compensates for the increased energy demanded of the new context (theme 5). First impressions are positive and differences are recognized as simply inconvenient. It is in the second phase that volunteers begin to feel the disorientation, fatigue, and frustration of their sojourn in an unfamiliar environment; the ways of the host culture are seen as unnatural, wrong, even abnormal, patience with the inconveniences wears thin, and volunteers retreat into the group of culturally similar others (other Peace Corps volunteers volunteering in the country) or even into solitude (theme 8). Finally, volunteers come to feel more attuned to the local way of life, and although difficulties (no matter how great or small, real or imagined) provoke occasional regression into dissonance (the subject matter of many a story from the second group – those focusing on one momentous issue), volunteers learn to function effectively in the new environment and are, at last, culturally adjusted (theme 9 through 11). The expectations to meet new friends, learn new skills, gain confidence and self-respect, and generally reach personal satisfaction through volunteering are finally achieved through a reciprocal relationship with local people: volunteers' 'gift of time' is being returned.

Not everyone makes it to this 'paradisiacal phase', however – there are many stories that are never written or published due to 'early termination', the ultimate volunteering failure – but most of them enter the last stage of the traveling rite of passage: they 'return' (theme 12) and the experience is brought home where the individual is reintegrated with his or her previous everyday life.

The stories suggest that as the volunteers encounter the new country and culture and try to grasp it, 'decode' it, they encounter themselves as well and take intense pleasure and satisfaction in the discovery. They alter and experience "personal growth"; they are "overjoyed" by it and they may yearn for those 'high spirits' when they return home. Writing about their experience abroad provides the volunteers with an opportunity to keep hold of certain aspects of their overseas life, to create a place where the intensity of the traveling may be prolonged.

Travel in itself is an expression: it displays individuality and a desire for freedom from social constraint. Volunteers' narratives in the form of volunteer stories serve to convey this expression. The outer, physical, spatial journey functions as a metaphor for the interior journey of the mind and consciousness (Clifford 1997). 'Overseas' the self 'journeys' and loses its fixed boundaries. This loss may be described by volunteers as something disturbing, but it is at the same time recognized as potentially empowering. And it needs to be documented and explained. If others do

not learn of it, the accomplishment, the growth stemming from this loss will somehow be diminished. The writing of a narrative about this loss of boundaries, in which volunteers act as their own 'talking-partners' is a method of constructing and maintaining the world(s) in which they live(d), the world(s) in which the self can once again find a sense of groundedness and home. Through their narration their relations to a place and its people are mapped out, and "a cognitive and sentimental space, a place and time in which to be" (Rapport 2000:77) comes into existence.

#### **Part IV: 'In whose words?': dominant narrative of Peace Corps experience**

That 'cognitive and sentimental space' that volunteers map out may be private, individual, and it may be created from and by means of an individual story. However, the themes listed above are not just individual experiential themes; they are very much 'shared' by volunteers' in their narratives, possibly as a result of editorial intervention. "Culture shock", "reciprocity", "home", etc. are thus analytical themes which I have introduced in order to show how not just one but many volunteers focus on these issues and describe them as crucial to their experience. Having conducted a description-analysis of the stories, I understand and conceptualize volunteers' shared narrative structuring of experience as a "dominant narrative" (Bruner 1986:150), "dominant" primarily signifying quantity – many similarly structured narratives/volunteer stories. The term "dominant narrative" thus implies that a significant number of informants tended to structure their narratives around similar themes. The question is: why does a dominant narrative occur in the retelling of what one would assume to be volunteers' highly individual experience? Why aren't individual narratives individual in their structure?

The answer lies in another term, the one related to the aspect of "dominant" signifying not quantity but relations of power – one narrative structure "dominates" all (volunteer) stories by being associated with various power-structures (Bruner 1986:150). The term is "authoritative tellings", which "sound like the words of fathers, adults, leaders, and teachers; they represent 'the official line' and are sponsored by or associated with the state" (Bruner and Gorfain 1984:59). Volunteer stories are one kind of such "authoritative tellings" and the words heard in them are those of the Peace Corps and the state it represents, summarized in the Peace Corps stated mission: to promote peace building and friendship between Americans and "interested countries", to help those countries understand Americans and American culture, and to promote "a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans" (<http://www.peacecorps.gov>).

It's not just its sheer size that makes the Peace Corps stand out among organizations offering volunteer placements overseas. Despite the

fact that the Peace Corps is only one of a number of international volunteer programs funded by U.S. taxpayers, it alone is part of the U.S. government. This fundamental reality, unique to the Peace Corps, has numerous implications that surfaced in my research on the Peace Corps stories. Since the Peace Corps is part of the U.S. Government, Peace Corps volunteers are employees of the government of the United States.<sup>39</sup> Based on a formal agreement between the government of the host country and the U.S. Embassy, the Peace Corps is a government-to-government program in which volunteers do not represent themselves but the U.S. Government, and come under the control of the U.S. Embassy. Peace Corps volunteers are "not permitted to publicly criticize U.S. policies or U.S. business in the country" (Collins et al 2002:181).<sup>40</sup> It follows from this that each "critical, challenging telling" (Bruner and Gorfain 1984:59) of a Peace Corps volunteer's experience abroad would be perceived as an attack on the authority of the state – the U. S., on the authority of the "official tellers" – the Peace Corps, and on the authority of "the story" – the Peace Corps rhetoric that revolves around their "Stated mission". We may thus venture to say that the experience told in "In Their Own Words" stories is for this reason filtered through Peace Corps logics even before it is articulated as a story and chosen as 'appropriate' by Peace Corps editors. The perceived experience is adapted to the demands of the 'genre' and the specific situation. The story is published on the Internet, so that future volunteers can learn about the Peace Corps from those invited to "share the experience". Incidents described are recognized as 'story-worthy' and the credibility of the material is enhanced by negotiating the accuracy and the demands posed by other volunteer stories the author can read before submitting his or her own piece – despite the story's exhibition of an aesthetically acceptable dramatic structure, the reader must know that the story is not a piece of fiction! The credibility of the story is furthermore enhanced by the fact that the author/volunteer, offers the authority of his or her own integrity and personal experience as the basis for the truthfulness of the story. Thus a 'genre' is created and the "authoritative telling" of the "official teller" – the Peace Corps – is widely reproduced.

The power of the state and the "official teller" in this case rests on the Peace Corps' ability to make its "authoritative telling" dominant (i.e. widely reproduced). The idea behind this is that such a "dominant" narrative structure (a 'shared' narrative told by a large number of volunteers) will have authority not only in the eyes of the teller but in the eyes of other readers/listeners who may not necessarily recognize this narrative as dominant. That may not always be the case, obviously, since others may acknowledge this narrative as dominant, but devoid of authority. This

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<sup>39</sup> Health and other (financial) benefits and intensive language training are possible because of the Peace Corps' extraordinary resources.

<sup>40</sup> This means that volunteers are not allowed, for example, to be a member of an organization such as Amnesty International or to tell anyone who asks them how they vote.



authority is solidified in discourse, however, and although volunteers do not seem to manufacture events or elaborate the experience of others,<sup>41</sup> and although their narratives are genuine attempts to convey simply and seriously some of the most important experiences of their own lives, they do participate in the telling of "the story", in the recounting of the "official line" of the Peace Corps.

For all these reasons it would be important to fully evaluate the impact of the Peace Corps on an individual volunteer's experience. The impact of Peace Corps organizational characteristics on individual decisions to volunteer could be further explored, as well as the impact of the organizational characteristics on the process from 'volunteering as lived' and 'volunteering as experienced' to 'volunteering as told' (to paraphrase Bruner 1986). Such an evaluation raises the questions of how and to what effect power is exercised in this particular organization, what programs, strategies and technologies support power relations, and who the beneficiaries and sufferers are in the web of power relations. This task, however, lies beyond the scope of the present study.

## **Part V: Conclusion**

By focusing on one particular group of volunteers – predominantly young, white, middle- and upper-class American citizens who volunteer overseas, in foreign countries that they had never visited and whose language they did not speak – this study contributes to the research on volunteering as a culturally grounded concept with implicit cultural references. The research primarily deals with the U.S and the Western construct of volunteering, due to space considerations and the focus on the Peace Corps organization, its returned volunteers, and their written narratives posted on the Peace Corps website.

This research depended mainly upon the Internet technology: I used the Internet to conduct 'archival' and 'library' research in cyberspace and have thus provided an example of how the Internet can be utilized as a research tool in anthropology. Moreover, the Internet itself is the setting for my anthropological study of volunteering grounded in virtual ethnography. The focus of my virtual ethnography, international volunteer stories posted on the Internet, was used in this research with the following intentions: 1) to fill the gap in literature on volunteering created by a general lack of anthropological research on volunteerism, and 2) to contribute to the study of personal narrative for anthropological research. More precisely, I was interested in 'hearing' volunteers' voices and how the people to whom they belong account for their own commitment to volunteer activities abroad. The voices had to be heard in a context; the

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<sup>41</sup> I form this opinion based on my own volunteering experience, personal interviews I conducted with international volunteers, as well as email descriptions of international volunteering experience written and sent to me by my former co-volunteers.

milieu in which they appear had to be explored. The importance of the influence of the international volunteer organization (the Peace Corps) to which particular volunteer voices 'belong' was raised time and time again. Analyzed and interpreted, positioned in a theoretical and cultural context, Peace Corps volunteer stories as narrative have provided us with an example of how people create plots from disordered experience and use the narratives as "meaning-making structures" (Young 1983 in Eastmond 1996:234). They show how the textual representation of (voluntary) actions is created and how they come to existence through the use of numerous yet individually recurring narrative themes, such as 'journeying', 'overcoming culture shock', 'practicing reciprocity'. Especially if looked at as a whole, the themes function as a plea for "cultural sensitivity" considered by volunteers and their organizations to be a tool against the "Othering" of the South. The themes, and thus the narrative of volunteer stories as a specific 'genre', stem from the rhetoric put out by the voluntary agency, namely the Peace Corps, a powerful public relations instrument of the U.S. Government that, in order to win broad public and thus bipartisan support in Congress (Collins et al 2002:193-194) purposefully constructs a misleading image of the smiling volunteer/American helping people in need in countries "far away". By discussing personal narratives of volunteer stories posted on the Peace Corps website from an anthropological perspective this paper uses the hermeneutic interpretation to challenge both the stereotype of 'volunteer as saviour', as well as the stereotype of 'volunteer as middle-class-do-gooder', and does not deny the work of volunteers eager to learn about the local culture and trying to make a contribution.

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## ČIJIM RIJEČIMA? ANTROPOLOŠKA NARATIVNA ANALIZA MEĐUNARODNIH VOLONTERSKIH PRIČA

### SAŽETAK

Iako se u društvenim znanostima volonterski rad sve češće javlja kao predmet istraživanja (Hall ed al. 2001; Davis Smith 2000, etc.), kulturni aspekti volonterskog rada još se uvijek rijetko promatraju iz antropološke perspektive, jer se volonterskom radu analitički prilazi kao religioznom ili ekonomskom, a ne kulturnom fenomenu (Roy i Ziemek 2001, Baker 1996, Clark 1991). Obradujući osobne iskaze ljudi koji volontiraju za američku organizaciju Peace Corps, ovaj rad proučava kulturne aspekte volonterskog rada iz perspektive samih volontera. Osobni iskazi koje autorica u tekstu "opisno analizira" uz pomoć takozvanih "narativnih tema" (Rapport 2000) nalaze se na Internetu pod nazivom "Volonterske priče". Sagledane u kontekstu međunarodnog volonterskog rada i sličnih volonterskih priča koje govore o radu volontera sa zapada (Amerikanaca, Kanadana i Europljana), u stranim zemljama (Indija, Afrika, itd.) te objavljenih na web stranicama drugih međunarodnih volonterskih organizacija, volonterske priče koje pišu volonteri Peace Corpsa specifičan su narativni žanr, koji se, između ostalog, očituje u redovitoj diskurzivnoj uporabi termina "kultura", "kulturni jaz", "kulturni dijalog". Ovaj rad smješta američki volonterski rad u stranim zemljama u povijesni i teorijski kontekst, daje pregled relevantne literature te ističe i teorijski obrađuje pojmove "kultura", "putovanje" i "reciprocitet", tri središnje teme u volonterskim pričama. Autoričina opisna analiza volonterskih priča volontera Peace Corpsa progovara o tome kako volonteri strukturiraju i promišljaju vlastita životna i radna iskustva u stranim zemljama. Članak tako istodobno pridonosi istraživanju i volonterskog rada i osobnih priča iz antropološke perspektive. Obzirom da se u metodološkom smislu autorica u tekstu bavi virtualnom etnografijom (jer se volonterske priče nalaze u kiberprostoru), ovaj se rad pridružuje antropološkim tekstovima koji kritički pristupaju temama kompjutorski posredovane komunikacije.

Ključne riječi: volonterski rad, narativna analiza, Internet, kompjutorski posredovana komunikacija