The Discourse of Voluntourism: American Exceptionalism in Application Essays Submitted to a Summer Overseas Volunteer Teaching Program

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism is defined as short-term, alternative travel that combines unskilled, voluntary service with holidaying, generally in the Global South. Approximately one-third of all volunteer tourism programs involve teaching the English language or other subjects. This study analyzes application essays submitted to a non-governmental organization (NGO) for short-term, volunteer teaching appointments in one Global South country. The authors consider such voluntourism in light of the notions of ideology, dialogism, and intertextuality in order to situate the discourse of the applications in Alexis de Tocqueville's vision of *American Exceptionalism*. The authors focus their analysis on both applicants' representation of themselves and their representation of "others" in North America and abroad. The dominant view in the essays was that young North Americans with little or no teaching experience would and could, through good intentions and their possession of Western societal accoutrements, uplift entire communities through a summer voluntary service program. However, disconfirming data appeared in the form of a discourse of *reciprocal relationships* in which the applicants anticipated a dramatic learning experience. Such discourse tended to appear in the essays of those applicants who had earned teaching credentials and thus may have been exposed to a discourse of multiculturalism and its attendant values on respect for diversity. The discourse of *othering*, in contrast, most often came from people preparing for careers in diplomacy and related fields. This suggests that the perspective of American Exceptionalism dominates in policy arenas, which potentially influence the lives of far more people than individual teachers can affect.

Keywords: Volunteer tourism, English language teaching, American Exceptionalism, discourse analysis, hidden dialogicality

Introduction

Henry Luce wrote *The American Century* in 1941, asserting that the United States should serve as the world's cultural exemplar in order to elevate those abroad to the level of affluence, knowledge, and production that middle class Americans took for granted. His essay has served as a template for action for those who have shared his view of the U.S. as a benevolent superpower. As part of the effort to spread American democracy and its values abroad, many initiatives – from the Peace Corps to military interventions and their aftermaths – have been undertaken to inculcate those beyond U.S. shores with the benefits of American society.

One current manifestation of this type of international intervention is the administration of summer volunteer programs through which the English language and related topics are taught to overseas populations, designed to help elevate foreigners to U.S. standards of prosperity. In this study, we analyze a set of applications to one non-governmental organization (NGO) that places North American native speakers of English in summer-long, overseas settings to teach host populations the English language and other topics. In relation to a set of essays submitted as the candidates' primary content in these applications, we investigated the stances toward international volunteer teaching that were conveyed through the discursive choices of the candidates. A candidate's stance is available through inquiry into the following questions:

1. What sorts of personas are the candidates conveying through the application essays in terms of their motivations to conduct volunteer teaching and the achievements and aspirations they state that qualify them for such service?
2. How are "other" populations—both "domestic" (i.e., U.S.) and "exotic" (i.e., non-U.S. and Global South)—represented in the essays in terms of either (a) hopes for reciprocal relationships or (b) practices of "othering," i.e., the construction of deficit views that provide binaries between Global North and Global South societies and populations?

By answering these questions, we investigate applicants' understandings of the purposes of short-term international volunteer teaching programs that involve minimal training. This view of the U.S. as a nation of extraordinary possibilities is traceable to de Tocqueville's (1831) notion of American Exceptionalism, which helped to motivate Sullivan's (1845) idea of Manifest Destiny, the belief developed in the 1840s that U.S. expansion was an inevitable and God-given national right and responsibility. This view of the U.S. as a nation of unique qualities and leadership abilities is evident in American international volunteer teaching programs and their assumption that exposure to an intervention from enthusiastic Americans – regardless of their level of skill, age, or expertise – will elevate the quality of the lives of those chosen as recipients of such service.

Volunteer tourism

The phenomenon of international volunteer tourism, or *voluntourism*, is defined as the short-term – generally one week to three month (Callanan & Thomas, 2005) – practice of "volunteer[ing] in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the poverty of some groups in society" (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). Some assert that voluntourism represents a "best practice" in new tourism. These advocates (e.g., Wearing, 2004) suggest that voluntourism decommodifies travel, removing the guest from group outings such as tour buses from which they merely gaze (Urry, 2002) and placing them more spontaneously and reciprocally in relationships with hosts and their diurnal lives.

Groups outside the tourism sector have also been influential in contributing to the growth of international volunteer tourism, albeit for the purposes of development aid and public diplomacy, a.k.a. *soft power* (Nye, 2004) rather than to advance alternative tourism (see also Vrasti, 2013 on volunteer tourism's role in neoliberal governance). The 2003 U.S. federal initiative, Volunteers for Prosperity, echoes Luce (1941) in stating as its mission to "promote, expand, and enhance well-defined volunteer service opportunities for highly skilled U.S. professionals who wish to work with nongovernmental and voluntary service organizations around the world in support of major U.S. prosperity initiatives" (Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 2003).

International volunteer tourism has also incurred criticism. Butcher (2003) refers to alternative tourism in general as New Moral Tourism and notes that despite the optimism surrounding alternative tourism, the flow of travel remains unidirectional, going from North to South, which leaves historically hierarchical relationships mostly intact. Simpson (2004) and others (e.g., Conran, 2011) argue that short-term, non-technical "aid" initiatives such as 6-week English language courses taught by inexperienced volunteers do little to alter the underlying structural causes of widespread global inequity. Other research indicates that only middle and upper-class people have both the time and material means to participate in volunteer tourism programs (Heath, 2007). Consequently, volunteer tourism may be a means by which already-privileged people accrue (more) distinctive cultural capital (Vrasti, 2013).

Participation in most international volunteer teaching programs does not require pedagogical training or experience as an educator. The NGO that provides our data requires neither formal teaching credentials nor prior teaching experience to volunteer. Instead, like most NGOs, it values good intentions, energy, and, in the case of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, native (prestige-dialect variety) English language speaking ability. A comparable NGO informs its applicants that "Any native English speaker can be a valuable resource in a classroom. . . . Even if you've never formally taught a classroom subject, you can teach conversational English skills. All you need is enthusiasm and a desire to help" (Global Volunteers, n.d.), evoking Luce's

(1941) call to use "sincerity and good will" as the foundation for the American Century and its mission to reshape the world in the image of the United States.

Theoretical Framework

The notion of discourse that frames our analysis relies on three constructs: Gee's (1990) outline of ideology, Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism, and Kristeva's (1984) views on intertextuality. Gee (1990) has argued that language is inherently ideological, embodying a political stance through which a worldview is enacted through tacit or explicit means, imparts a stance that it is impervious to question or criticism, and suggests the marginality or dubiousness of values and perspectives central to other Discourses. The ideological nature of language is illustrated in Luce's (1941) argument that the 20th century was destined to position the U.S. as the world's leader and exemplar. His essay's embodiment of conservative values could be taken as the founding document for the Obama-era Tea Party movement, including as it does the following assertion:

> We start into [World War II] with huge Government debt, a vast bureaucracy and a whole generation of young people trained to look to the Government as the source of all life. The [Democratic] Party in power is the one which for long years has been the most sympathetic to all manner of socialist doctrines and collectivist trends. The President of the United States [Franklin D. Roosevelt] has continually reached for more and more power, and he owes his continuation in office today largely to the coming of the war. Thus, the fear that the United States will be driven to a national socialism, as a result of cataclysmic circumstances and contrary to the free will of the American people, is an entirely justifiable fear. (pp. 162-163)

The linkage between Luce's remarks and 21st Century Tea Party rhetoric illustrates Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism, which Burke (1941) describes through the metaphor of a parlor conversation in which people enter an ongoing discussion that traces back indefinitely, first as a listener and then as a participant who adapts to the discussion's tone and content, before leaving and yielding the floor to new conversationalists. Discourse in this sense does not arise out of thin air but is always a conversational turn derived from and directed to others, even if they are only anticipated or imagined. Dialogism enables the discourse of a particular community to become ideologically normalized: Their historical, ongoing conversation ceases to question certain axioms that in turn marginalize other perspectives on the topic.

In such cases the dialogism is contained rather than engaged with other ways of viewing the world. Dialogism may be exhibited explicitly (e.g., as part of an actual conversation) or through what Bakhtin (1984) calls *hidden dialogicality*, in which texts take into account prior texts even if these conver-

sational antecedents are not present or acknowledged. While dialogism refers to the fact of this ongoing conversation, intertextuality refers to the forms and social practices from which new texts take shape. Intertextuality thus helps account for the enduring traits of discourse as well as the variations made in conventional forms by particular communities of practice.

Our analysis of admissions essays submitted to an NGO sponsoring a short-term international volunteer teaching program fits within the issues we have reviewed, both topically and theoretically. The essays work in dialogue with the essay prompts and web-based discourse provided by the NGO, which positions its international voluntourism program as a benevolent outreach effort through which the English language and its cultural accoutrements will elevate the lives of its recipients. Our analysis thus illustrates the manner in which an ideology is presented unproblematically and as a matter of common sense; taken up dialogically so that newcomers gravitate to its norms; relies on intertextual practices to produce new texts that reinforce the values that prompt them; and perpetuates the "parlor conversation" across generations, often uncritically and in service of a nationalistic Discourse. This Discourse embodies a particular national myth of the U.S. as a beneficent superpower doing good globally by spreading its values to "developing" nations whose own people are considered relatively primitive and in need of cultural, technological, and linguistic uplifting.

The application essays are of particular interest because they engage in what we regard as hidden dialogicality in that they are not explicitly or deliberately embedded in the discourse of American Exceptionalism or its corollaries outlined in *The American Century*. Yet, by taking up of the ideology embedded in the NGO's stated belief system and the pragmatic need to write in dialogue with its application essay prompts, the essay authors articulate these principles as a matter of course. The application essays thus illustrate the power of dialogism and its ideological, intertextual nature to recruit new adherents and contribute to the normalization of a Discourse's dominant assumptions.

Context of the investigation

The data consist of applications submitted to and accepted by a U.S.-based NGO that works with overseas ministries of education to develop programs in English as a Foreign Language teaching, technology, and related topics identified by the host nation for the stated purposes of international development. The NGO is responsible for placing the applicants, who pay their own way if their service is not otherwise funded. We focus on a complete batch of applications submitted to one program in a Global South country late in the first decade of the 21st Century. This program focused on the teaching of the English language to residents who lacked English fluency or other skills deemed essential by the host country's ministry of education.

Method

Data collection

The study's first author had access to these essays through her position as a volunteer summer intern in the headquarters of this NGO during her doctoral studies. She was granted permission by the NGO administrators to conduct a study of the application essays as part of her research on the volunteers' motivations for teaching overseas. We have masked the identity of each applicant by not identifying the specific NGO, obscuring the year from which the batch of essays was selected, masking the location of the summer program, and using pseudonyms throughout the article to protect the individual writers' identities.

The first author extracted application portfolios that included a cover sheet indicating the applicant's educational history, work experience, volunteer experiences, and prior overseas travel. She also collected responses to three essay prompts, totaling roughly three double-spaced typed pages. The authors selected those applications submitted to, and accepted for, one year's summer program—a total of 28 applications.

Data analysis

The authors read the applications collaboratively, creating a prototype of the coding scheme as they read each application. The process involved reading each essay and then discussing it to consider the discourses implicated in the applicant's positioning via the writing. Through this reading, we constructed a category system that we developed and refined over the course of the analysis. Our coding scheme included two broad categories: *Representation of the Self* and *Representation of Other Populations*. Within each broad category, we identified two superordinate categories. For *Representation of the Self*, we found that applicants constructed personas related to their *motivations* for volunteering and the *achievements and aspirations* they hoped would impress the NGO evaluators. Within the superordinate category, *motivations*, applicants expressed what we termed the subordinate categories of *self-fulfillment* and/or *lofty vision.* Within the superordinate category, *achievements and aspirations*, applicants expressed the subordinate categories of *self-advancement* and/or *self-aggrandizement*.

Within the broad category, *Representation of Other Populations*, we found that applicants described two ways of relating to people different from themselves: *reciprocal relationships* and *othering*. The superordinate category, *reciprocal relationships*, was applied to segments of text in which applicants anticipated personally changing through their interactions with host people. The superordinate category, *othering*, was applied to segments of text in which applicants positioned themselves as culturally superior to either *domestic* or *"exotic" others*, two subordinate categories that emerged from the data.

Finally, within each subordinate category, we developed specific codes that finely characterized the applicants' discursive choices. In the *subordinate* category of *"exotic" other*, for example, we identified the specific codes of *romanticizing*, *dehistoricizing*, *Westernizing*, and *pathologizing*. Appendices 1 and 2 tabulate and name each broad category, superordinate category, subordinate category, and specific code, indicating the frequency with which we identified each specific code in the essays (a single frequency refers to the appearance, however many times, of a code in a candidate's essays) and provides an illustration from the data corpus.

Findings

We next report what our analysis yielded about the essays in relation to discourses of American Exceptionalism and related ideologies.

Representation of the Self

Motivations of self. The first essay question provided by the NGO prompted the applicants to discuss their motivations to teach abroad. Responses fell in two areas: the applicants' desire for *self-fulfillment* through volunteering, and what we considered to be their *lofty vision* for what their service might achieve for not merely the host community, but also global peace and prosperity.

Self-fulfillment. In responding to the NGO's essay prompts, applicants were cued to talk about personal goals they hoped to achieve and the contributions they aspired to bring to the host community. Many of the applicants were at some transitional point in their lives such as graduating from college or seeking to fill breaks between college terms in productive and adventuresome ways. Their motivations for volunteering often reflected the ways in which the experience could enable them to explore the world as a way of understanding and fulfilling themselves, reflecting what Butcher and Smith (2015) call the contemporary "therapeutic" role of international volunteering. In illustration, Suzanne Towers, an elementary school learning assistant and special education tutor in her mid-twenties, wrote:

> I would like to go to [the host country], meet new people, and help make a difference. It would be valuable to learn more about the world through this opportunity. I have never been to [the host continent], stayed with a host family, or traveled outside the U.S. alone. I wish to gain more confidence and self-reliance. I believe that this life experience will challenge and strengthen me. … My desire is to teach in a community that is lacking and disadvantaged. … I would like to reach out to individuals, help them gain awareness, and make a positive change in their lives.

Suzanne's remarks illustrate well the sort of *self-fulfillment* sought by applicants through international volunteering. The NGO, with an on-site field

director and stateside support office, would provide a safe and structured adventure for a first-time overseas traveler and enable her to meet her personal interests in experiencing a new culture. This service would, Suzanne believed, draw on her readiness to change through acquisition of confidence and self-reliance, further position her to reach her goals of positively affecting people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and move her outside of her comfort zone, thus satisfying her curiosity about the host continent. Suzanne's remarks further suggest a link to the discourse of American Exceptionalism: despite her acknowledgement that she had never traveled abroad before and lacked self-confidence herself, her presence could help local community members "gain awareness and make a positive change in their lives," which we infer would follow from their exposure to a cosmopolitan American like herself.

Lofty vision. Given the callow age of many applicants and tendency for youth to undertake service with idealistic intentions (Simpson, 2004), it is no surprise that we identified 58 instances in the essays in which candidates expressed what we coded as a *lofty vision* for their service overseas. Charlene Hillsman, a Canadian in her early 20s who had managed a business since graduating from high school, said, "Strength will help me to carry on if ever I am feeling hopeless and love will give me the power to give hope to others." We considered the idea that love could overcome the presumed hopelessness of entire communities to be an instance of naïve optimism of the sort characteristic of this category. As Charlene's remarks suggest, moreover, a *lofty vision* was often coupled with the corollary presumption that Global South people are uniformly limited, hopeless, and in need of inspiration from a visiting North American volunteer (see also Simpson, 2004).

Even applicants who explicitly denied naïveté expressed a *lofty vision* of what their volunteer teaching for two months could achieve. Dallas Housman, a recent college graduate working as a theater workshop facilitator, wrote that

> My motivation for applying to [the NGO] is simple: to affect [sic] change. I use the word change, not with a fleeting whim of idealism, but with a pragmatic understanding of what is possible. Providing education is not a service of the gifted to the barren, it is an exchange of truths. My life is propelled forward in search of such exchanges. I am a man of words. They are what I know. If I can provide a child, an adult, an elder, with the unimaginable potential of language—I can empower another human being to affect [sic] change within their own lives.

We assume that the members of the host community to which volunteers travel already possessed language. Dallas's remarks suggest that he neglected potentials already available in the host community, which he appeared to consider stagnant and in need of change according to the trajectory he envisioned for them. His altruism was expressed through bromides such as education serving as "an exchange of truths."

Achievements and aspirations of self.

Self-advancement. The second essay question asked applicants to discuss the "personal goals that you aim to achieve" through short-term, voluntary service. Applicants appeared to interpret this question as soliciting the ways in which volunteering would help them to further their lives and careers following their return home. This interpretation was evident in the essay of Mary Carver, a college senior majoring in mathematics at a small, U.S. Jesuit university. With no specific plans following graduation, she looked to short-term, volunteer teaching as a way to occupy her time in a worthwhile manner while also positioning herself to meet her future goals. She wrote:

> As a senior in college, I have spent much of the past year contemplating my life after graduation. I have considered every option, from law school to traveling for a year, but nothing inspires me in the same way the opportunity to volunteer abroad does. It is an option I have had in my mind for quite some time, and now is the perfect time for me to go in terms of where I am personally in my life. … I am considering a career in international development, and this experience will help inform my decision in terms of the next steps I take.

Mary's interest in portfolio building to serve her anticipated career in international development was echoed explicitly in the essay of Steven Dudley, a first-year student at an Ivy League university. He wrote:

> I want to learn about [the host country's] culture firsthand and to understand the way that the educational system functions in a developing country. These goals are part of my larger interest in education and international development because in the future I hope to work for [an NGO] that focuses on international development. At that point, I think my familiarity with educational systems in [the host country] and programs such as [the NGO] will be extremely important because education is a vital component of improving developing nations.

Steven exhibited corporate confidence in his hopes to modernize developing nations through education, which presumably elevates host people from their ostensible low self-esteem and ignorance.

Portfolio-building and accompanying professional growth, achieved through interest bundling, was also apparent in the essays of Edie Chong, an Asian American in her late twenties who had worked as a web designer. She wrote that volunteering to teach English in the host country would accentuate her prospects for future achievements, saying:

> I am applying for graduate studies in Anthropology, in which my research is on cultural identity in [in the host country]. Naturally, then, to

> teach for the summer before I begin my studies in that country would be of tremendous value. … I also hope to get a head start on learning [a language of the host country], and to do so in an organic immersion environment would be far more effective for me than a classroom.

Living abroad for the summer in a nation-state where non-Western cultures were available would advance Edie's interests as a budding anthropologist and provide her with a value-added advantage by learning a language in an "immersion environment."

Self-aggrandizement. The third essay question prompted applicants to talk about their personal qualities, asking, "Living and working in a developing country for an extended period of time is quite challenging. What qualities do you possess that will be valuable as you face these challenges?" This question involves the assumption that "developing" countries present immediate "challenges" to North Americans – presumably through their deficits related to their lack of indications of prosperity. The question further prompts applicants to discuss the "qualities" they possess, which appeared to encourage them to engage in self-aggrandizing statements.

Mike Dennison, a sophomore at an elite liberal arts college who was majoring in international relations, wrote,

> I have realized how important it is to lend a hand, but also how oblivious most Americans are to this need. … I've been privileged with a wonderful life, and I desire to utilize this to its full potential, helping others who aren't so fortunate.

In this brief comment we identified two discourses: a sense of noblesse oblige in using his privileged position to help the presumably downtrodden and his sense of singularity in being more sensitive and aware than other Americans. Such beliefs were at times coupled with a belief in divine intervention that led the candidates to the volunteering opportunity. Christie Vasquez, for instance, a first-year student at the university with which our focal NGO has a loose affiliation, said, "When I came to [the university] I was excited to learn of its joint history with [the NGO]—it was as if it was a sign. Everything was coming together!"

Another illustration of *self-aggrandizement* appeared in the essay of Kaitlin Rochester, a senior at a private liberal arts college majoring in international affairs. Her prior teaching experiences came from helping Honduran children for two weeks as they painted a water tank and tutoring children in a U.S. city after school. She wrote:

> I hope to bring a different style of teaching and my enthusiastic personality to the [host] classroom and community. I have always been creative and think that I would be able to engage students easily. I am eager to

> immerse myself in a culture so different from my own, and I hope to gain new perspectives while also bringing new ones to the people I interact with … Realizing that I was giving these [Honduran] children new skills was a great feeling and I felt proud that they were able to create such a beautiful design through my instruction. … New places and experiences are about being able to change as an individual and develop rather than just "adjusting to change." It is necessary to be active as change occurs and not just a bystander watching something happening in one's own life without any action.

In this excerpt, Kaitlin exhibited *self-aggrandizement* in a variety of ways. She revealed her big heart in her disposition to help others, her accomplishments in her creative teaching of painting skills, her adaptability in making the most of any situation, and her positive thinking in seeing possibilities where others might not. We close this section with Kaitlin's essay excerpts because her remarks further reveal her *Representation of other populations*, the area we take up next.

Representation of other populations

Reciprocal relationships. In the category, *reciprocal relationships,* the applicants situated themselves as receptive to the host culture and hesitant to view their roles as beneficent benefactors (cf. Huberman, 2012). Codes within this category suggest good intentions offered with humility and curiosity. Typical of such responses was that of Carly Booker, a senior at a large Midwestern university graduating with teaching credentials. She wrote:

> During my time in [the host country], I hope to create a classroom that appreciates and respects diversity and intellectual growth. Through my increased understanding of the culture, I hope to be able to better teach English and witness my students' progression with the language without jeopardizing the integrity of their culture. … I want to be an active member of the community rather than just a visitor.

Carly was coded for her equanimity regarding the need to situate students culturally, her humility in recognizing and deferring to the integrity of the host culture, and her embracing difference in respecting the diversity of students and their backgrounds and trajectories.

One of the specific codes that comprised the subordinate category, *reciprocal relations*, we termed *historicizing/contextualizing the other*. This code is well revealed in the essay of Janice Weinstein, a first-year student at an elite private college majoring in political science. Rather than viewing host community residents as ahistorical people living outside the context of colonial influence, she made an effort to understand a current crisis, the AIDS pan-

demic, as a consequence of cultural and historical factors. Having previously volunteered in the host country, she wrote:

> It became so clear to me when I worked with AIDS patients in [the host country], heard their devastating personal stories, and experienced the pandemic through their eyes, that any meaningful solution needs to also focus on the issues of poverty, access to health care, stigma, and the need to empower women. A failure to examine this crisis more broadly will be a failure to those who suffer most. So how can I plan an active role in the search for answers to pressing issues like the AIDS pandemic? I can embrace learning and question the world around me, constantly pushing the boundaries of my thinking. I can step outside of my comfort zone and learn experientially, analyzing issues through a variety of critical lenses. I can challenge conventional wisdom when other ideas, including my own, steer me in a different direction, and consider different points of view without abandoning my idealism or sacrificing my principles. I can view problems in their larger cultural context and show empathy towards others, seeking common values as opposed to precise truths.

By attending to the structural conditions that contributed to the spread of AIDS, Janice distinguished herself from many other applicants who took a more superficial view of the host country, particularly with regard to the deep and multifaceted origins of its social and economic problems. We take up such perspectives in the final section of our analysis, in which we review the *othering* discourse of the NGO application essays, which outnumbered applicants' aspirations for *reciprocal relations* roughly 3:1 in our coding. We discuss each of the two subordinate codes, *domestic other* and *"exotic" other*, in turn. Further, because of its salience to American Exceptionalism discourse, we tease apart the *"exotic other"* subordinate category in terms of the specific categories that comprised it—categories we named *romanticizing*, *dehistoricizing*, *Westernizing*, and *pathologizing* discourses.

Othering

Domestic other. In their essays, applicants often described a North American instructional episode in which they described students from backgrounds variously characterized as urban, inner-city, and related code words for underprivileged, impoverished, and otherwise deficient. Maxwell Upton, a first-year student at a private university majoring in neurobiology, made the following remarks in discussing his greatest experience as a Catechism teacher aid. He sought to establish a bond with his students that

> made me care even more deeply about inculcating in them the Christian principles I hold valuable. I know that with these tools and an education,

> these kids, who came from difficult, underprivileged homes, would be able to grow up to live a better life.

Maxwell's efforts toward instilling values are evident in his hope to impress his own Christian beliefs in his students. This, to him, was a way to elevate students' self-esteem in the presumed absence of a value system in their homes and communities.

The essay of Loren Drake, a college senior at a private college majoring in human development, also illustrated this tendency to view other populations as uniformly needy. In her essay, she wrote:

> I have worked with many children from impoverished areas of [a large U.S. city]. . . . I am confronted with their violent world that these kids not only endure but are also influenced by. . . . While structural inequalities that cause poverty and violence are complex, the students [I worked with] felt empowered [by my teaching] and realized change is possible when many voices speak together. The most important thing you can do through teaching is empowerment—showing students they can succeed. I will remember this when working in a developing nation. My goals are high. I am not underestimating the harsh environment; I just don't believe our goals should be any lower.

Loren saw her teaching as an act of providing students with a role model. She also saw herself as helping students develop a capacity for bootstrapping themselves out of their impoverished lives. Her aspiration to maintain high standards when teaching in a "developing nation" suggests that she also viewed the host country population as fundamentally stricken by poverty and violence, similar to what she had found in urban America.

"Exotic" othe

Romanticizing. Applicants romanticized foreign populations through a variety of means. These romantic portrayals elided cultural complexity and celebrated other people to the point of homogenizing them into a happy whole. Maxwell Upton, initially fearful while navigating street life during a previous international volunteer experience, ultimately concluded that "my fears were unfounded; that Ghanaians are genuinely humble people, that their soul is pure, and that with their smiles, Ghanaians light up Western Africa." Maxwell's remarks were coded for their view of happy natives with pure souls and timeless, embraceable traditions.

Loren Drake expressed her view of difference as adventure through a process of Orientalizing. She described her anticipation of teaching in the host country, saying,

> Since I was ten years old, I have wanted to live in [the host country]. I anxiously checked the mail every week for the next National Geographic Magazine, flipping through the pages, infatuated by the pictures of people and cultures that were so different than [sic] the white picket fence, suburban America I lived in. I stared into the eyes of those on the pages, wanting to say hello. … Different cultures and people are my passion.

Loren then provided a trope common to multiple applicants' essays: taking cold showers and riding rickety bicycles (see Doerr & Suarez, 2013, for more on the "allegory of cold showers" as an index of immersion abroad). Both taking cold showers and riding old bicycles indicated the candidates' feeling of going native in a foreign land. Loren wrote:

> While studying abroad in [a large city], Spain, there were many cultural differences I was forced to adjust to. The apartment I lived in had no hot water and heat was scarce. . . . I quickly knew that for this place to feel like home, I had to try to become one of the natives. I bought an old bike to venture through the city and gain my independence from the typical American "hangouts." … I bought an orange a day at the same local *fruteria*. Whether an orange was desirable or not, the elder man's smile and kind words were always welcomed. … I embraced the culture and its people. The long conversations I had with old women on the street or local students in a café were worth every cold shower and night without heat.

We infer that Loren chose the old bike from among better options as a way of going native in Spain, a nation in which upscale bicycle tours serve as a major tourism attraction.

Dehistoricizing. Applicants engaged in *dehistoricizing the other* by disengaging Global South peoples' current living conditions from the historical impacts of such factors as colonization, natural resource extraction, environmental degradation, failed development initiatives, and structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Rather, Global South people were viewed as disadvantaged as a consequence of their own inferior cultures and in need of interventions from abroad. Maxwell Upton, for instance, hoped to make a second visit to the host country because of what he called his

> personal desire to help others who are less fortunate than me [sic]. As a child, my family's frequent visits to Mexico allowed me to discover that I was indeed privileged; that simply by living in the United States, I had so much more than others. Years later, my volunteering experiences to China and Ghana reaffirmed this revelation. I am applying to [the NGO] because I feel that as a [private university] student, as an American, but

> most importantly, as a human being, it is my duty to contribute in whichever way in helping disadvantaged citizens of the world.

Maxwell first indicated what we coded as lotto logic: i.e., the belief that his worldly advantages followed from simple good fortune rather than benefitting from structural elements that produced the inequities he so lamented. Such thinking produced what we coded as a surface understanding of Global South problems. For example, he omitted the consequences of colonialism in the Global South when identifying problematic conditions there. This patronizing view was evident in the noblesse oblige he showed in essay: considering it his "duty to contribute in whichever way in helping disadvantaged citizens of the world."

Westernizing. *Westernizing* discourses assume that cultures are destined, through technological progress, to uniformly advance toward U.S.-like affluence (cf. Escobar, 1995). Helen Chen, a junior psychology major at a private liberal arts college, this discourse when she wrote:

> I would like to become aware of the country's needs in order to be informed as well as inform others about the different opportunities to deliver global social change. While in [the NGO's] program, I hope to show the students that finding success as an individual, community, or country is not impossible. I truly believe that [host country] individuals can use their growing knowledge as a means to stir up opportunities for positive changes in the future. As a [NGO] volunteer, I intend to fully contribute my time, knowledge, and efforts to engage students in making the most of their education and striving upward in all aspects of their lives.

We interpreted Helen's goal to "deliver global social change" as an instance of Westocentrism. She elaborated on this goal by hoping to introduce the idea of "finding success" to the presumably downtrodden host population, which she would help by "stir[ring] up opportunities for positive change."

Helen's remarks also suggest that bootstrapping can help Global South people lift themselves out of their current conditions. Steven Dudley similarly wrote:

> I consider education to be one of the most important parts of modernizing a developing country because an education allows a student to understand the world in which he lives and the ways in which his community may be improved. As a [NGO] volunteer, I will have the opportunity to contribute to my students' self-confidence and ability to understand the world around them.

Steven's hopes suggest the belief that host country residents lack the self-confidence to elevate themselves, which their presumably limited experi-

ences and vision prevent them from doing. Steven's observations also indicate Westocentrism in that he believed that someone such as he could provide the window to global understanding that locals' own leaders and elders could not.

Pathologizing. The tendency to pathologize foreign populations was a common practice in the application essays. Gillian Reinhart, for instance, wrote that her "special education background in the classroom" would enable her "to design methods of instruction that will be most beneficial to the students I work with" in the host nation, suggesting a belief that the children there had inborn deficits, a sort of infantilizing we also saw across the essays.

Such infantile populations would also benefit from someone who could speak for them in light of their voicelessness. Charlene Hillsman, for instance, characterized the entire host continent as forgotten:

> I want to remember "the forgotten continent." Many people choose to volunteer for disaster relief foundations, local hospitals, even at schools or around the community; all being noble causes. Personally however, I want to volunteer and fight for those who by so many have been forgotten. I want to be the eyes, ears and a voice of [the host country]. In 2004, 300,000 people were killed in the tsunami disaster in South East Asia and the aid response was outstanding. Yet as 300,000 people in [the host continent] die of AIDS, malaria and malnutrition every month often goes unnoticed.

Charlene proceeded to further pathologize the host continent by referring to its states of disadvantage and poverty, saying,

> I want to figure out a way to halt the daily atrocities and be part of the restoration of pride and strength amongst the [host country] people. . . . I believe having worked in a Third World country with underprivileged children will serve as a great incentive for me to do well in my studies. I am certain my fun and loving energy will bring a smile to those I meet along the way as I aspire to restore hope amongst those who have lost it.

Charlene's use of the terms *Third World* and *forgotten continent* indexes the colonial imperium, whose ambivalence includes a superficial recognition of the need for states to be independent yet concern that liberated colonies have few cultural or economic resources through which to sustain themselves outside the sphere of Western patronage. This lamentable state of pathology could, wrote applicants, be alleviated through visiting volunteers' sincere sentiments and efforts. Another program applicant, Marti Baxter, typified this perspective, saying:

> The socialization of the youth in [the host country] is one of the most important ways to overcome their painful history. I want to be a part of that. I want to help the children to see a life of opportunities as big or

small as they may be. I plan to instill a sense of hope and confidence into the lives of these children.

Discussion

Henry Luce (1941) asserted that "[i]t now becomes our time to be the powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world and do their mysterious work of lifting the life of mankind from the level of the beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower than the angels" (cited in Hogan, 1999, p. 233). People overseas were typically pathologized in the application essays within the discourse of American Exceptionalism ventriloquated by Luce. From a postcolonial perspective (e.g., Escobar, 1995), NGO-designed interventions are typically designed to remediate or repair communities that are constructed as homogeneously poor, downtrodden, and teleologically behind the trajectory set by Global North economies. In this frame, countries such as the U.S. are constructed as uniformly affluent and the Global South is constructed as pervasively impoverished and deprived as a consequence of peoples' own inherent cultural failures and shortcomings. Like Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Global South people are considered to be agents of their own misfortune; they are only capable of salvation and uplifting through the involvement of more affluent, Global North others.

Yet, postcolonial scholars (e.g., Escobar, 1995; Sachs, 1992) do not view poverty in the Global South as a consequence of local people's cultural and moral destitution. Rather, the inequitable distribution of global wealth follows from a confluence of historical and present-day geopolitical factors including, but not limited to, the fiscal austerity measures imposed by supranational financial institutions on vulnerable nations; multinational trade agreements that favor the growth of colossal corporations over the subsistence of small and family-run businesses; and local and national government policies that contribute to multi-scalar, far-reaching inequities. Poverty thus cannot be disengaged from the interventions of historical and neo-imperial powers.

The notion of American Exceptionalism positions the United States as an imperial, if benevolent, superpower whose influence and inherent greatness oblige its people to improve the lives of others around the globe. Our analysis, however, suggests that the perspective inherent to American Exceptionalism produces unacknowledged contradictions that postcolonial scholars consider to be problematic. Fundamentally, it unhinges the U.S. from complicity in past and contemporary events that have contributed to global economic disparities. If poverty is a problem in the Global South, it cannot be considered apart from decisions that actors such as the Washington Consensus of privatization, trade liberalization, and deregulation continues to fuel (Davis, 2006).

Rhetorically, the discourse of American Exceptionalism, such as that exhibited in the application essays analyzed in this study, homogenizes great and diverse nations into a single population type. In the host country to which applicants in this study applied to volunteer, for instance, numerous official languages are spoken. The United Nations classifies it as a middle-income

country; three different rankings (World Bank, 2008; International Monetary Fund, 2009; and CIA World Factbook, 2009) list its Gross Domestic Product as ahead of Finland, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Portugal, Egypt, and many other nations not presumed to be pervasively impoverished and culturally deprived. In a form of rhetorical synecdoche, however, only the poorest and most abject of the host nation's citizens served to personify the recipients of volunteer service in the discourse of the application essays we analyzed.

A corollary to this misrepresentation concerns the applicants' depiction of U.S. residents as uniformly affluent. Even as they often spoke of *domestic* others as devoid of values, self-esteem, role models, initiative, and worldliness – often as a result of poverty – applicants' aspirations were to go overseas to uplift *foreign* populations. When discussing successful teaching experiences, for example, applicants tended to focus on their work with U.S. students living in poverty, perhaps as a way to demonstrate their credentials for teaching destitute people overseas. American Exceptionalism, as articulated in these essays and no doubt in many such treatises, referred to a certain kind of American, one who is privileged and affluent and possessed of a spirit of noblesse oblige – at least towards indigent people living outside of the U.S. The authors of such expressions have the time to afford a two-month hiatus from work or school to volunteer as a way to, as some of the applicants directly acknowledged, build portfolios designed to launch their professional futures in the realms of .com, .edu, .gov, and .org. Meanwhile, poverty in the U.S. remains a problem of the poor, who must bootstrap themselves into affluence independent of societal structures and institutions whose priorities and practices do little to afford their economic ascendance.

As we have reviewed, disconfirming data appeared in the form of a discourse of *reciprocal relationships* in which the applicants anticipated a dramatic learning experience. It may be worth noting that such discourse tended to appear in the essays of those applicants who had earned teaching credentials and thus may have been exposed to a discourse of multiculturalism and its attendant values on respect for diversity. Each applicant who had formal training as a teacher was coded for reciprocal relationships, and of those without teaching credentials, only two were coded in this category. Of these two, one identified as Latina and the other Jewish, suggesting the possibility that they might have experienced othering in their own lives. The discourse of othering, in contrast, most often came from people preparing for careers in diplomacy and related fields. This suggests that the perspective of American Exceptionalism dominates in policy arenas, which potentially influence the lives of far more people than individual teachers can affect.

Our study suggests the pervasiveness of the discourse of American Exceptionalism in U.S. society such that it becomes naturalized and commonsense in the thinking of many, even college-age applicants to a summer volunteer teaching program. The NGO streamed this discourse into its documents and suggested its appropriateness in its essay prompts, and the applicants for the most part took it up without critique. Applicants overall did not

challenge the consumptive habits of U.S. residents or the ways in which the consequences of these habits impinge on the quality of life in the Global South. Just as American drug use creates violence in Mexico that in turn fuels anti-immigration feelings in the U.S., policies and practices driven by American consumption of oil, precious metals, cheap products, and other resources contribute to poverty that Americans then blame on those who are most vulnerable and have the fewest resources for combating exploitation. This problem of logical circularity seems built into the discourse of American Exceptionalism and its unwillingness to look inward for the source of problems, either domestically or abroad.

Gee (1990) views discourse analysis as fundamentally moral. One moral consequence of our analysis is to unearth ideologies that are not readily apparent in the speech and related communication of those espousing the exceptional characteristics of Americans. Going to a Global South country to help people in poverty overlooks the homeless people passed on the sidewalk on the way to the NGO's U.S. headquarters. Locating poverty in the culture of others does little to address either systemic inequities in the U.S. or the ways in which the daily practices of American consumerism contribute to the problems that exist abroad. Interrogating the discourse of American Exceptionalism, and the discourse of international voluntourism that swims in its stream, can potentially illuminate these problematic issues and help lay the foundation for a more critical way of thinking about the consequences of personal actions in a complex and interconnected world. For example, participation in volunteer tourism increasingly serves as evidence of "global citizenship" (Butcher & Smith, 2015). It behooves would-be volunteers and other stakeholders in volunteer tourism to examine whether and how notions of "global citizenship" are a gloss for American Exceptionalism.

Luce defined the 20th Century as American. If the 21st Century shows unacknowledged strains of that influence, then defining the new century might involve interrogating nationalistic discourses and the ways in which their contradictions exacerbate the very problems that they aspire to address. The discourse of voluntourism evident in the essays analyzed for this study provides one avenue for understanding the ideological underpinnings and practical consequences of viewing the U.S. only in terms of its stated intentions but not in terms of its unintended effects.

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Appendix 1: Coding scheme: Representation of the Self

Broad Category: Representation of the Self (250 occurrences)
Superordinate Category: Motivations of Self (87 occurrences)
Subordinate Category: Self-fulfillment (29 occurrences)

Readiness to change (5). "I have been a teacher in special education for over ten years. . . . I am striving for greater personal challenges in my teaching opportunities."	***Safe and structured adventure*** (5). "Adventures are the only experiences worth having. For without risk, one gains nothing. However, I am a cautious risk-taker. I probe unknown surroundings with a balanced approach of respect and insatiable curiosity."	***Curiosity*** (8). "I have been curious about S. Africa all my life."	***Personal interests*** (11). "My primary goal of joining [the NGO] is to become a more effective leader."

Subordinate Category: Lofty Vision (58 occurrences)

Uplifting quotes (4). "As Maya Angelou once said 'Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all peoples cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try and understand each other, we may even become	***Altruism*** (8). "There are many children who do not receive comprehensive, life-fulfilling educations because of political turmoil, residual racism, or poverty. I want to be an [NGO] volunteer to help chip away at these iniquities, and help rebuild a better future for the people in S.	***Ambassadorial discourse*** (9). "Of the many skills I bring to the table . . . the greatest contribution is simply my willingness to participate in the community and create cultural understandings between the two nations."	***Naïve optimism*** (18). "If I can provide a child, an adult, an elder with the unimaginable potential of language—I can empower another human being to effect change within their own lives."	***Bromide*** (19). "I will form strong bonds that will last a lifetime."

friends.’”	Africa, no matter how small of a contribution I make.”			

Superordinate Category: Achievements and Aspirations of Self (163 occurrences)

Subordinate Category: Self-advancement (42 occurrences)

Gap year experience (4). “My life is soon to be entering into a transitional period in which I will complete my undergraduate studies and gain practical field experience before embarking on the journey to graduate school.”	***Interest bundling*** (5). “Teaching internationally would combine so many things I love: traveling, experiencing/studying different cultures, working with children, and making a difference in places that really need the extra help.”	***Professional growth*** (8). “I am considering a career in international development, and this experience will help inform my decision in terms of the next steps I take in my life.”	***Portfolio-building*** (11). “I hope volunteering with [the NGO] will be the first step in reaching my long term goal of one day working for the United Nations.”	***Corporate confidence*** (14). “I am a leader who is not afraid to take initiative in speaking my mind or getting things done. . . . I am flexible and rational. . . . I think being reasonable will be particularly useful in a place where there will be many challenges.”

Subordinate Category: Self-aggrandizement (121 occurrences)

Knowledge display (3). “Recently I sat down with a classmate from my	***Name-dropping*** (3). “I had undertaken the prestigious	***Big heart*** (4). “Although I imagine	***Accomplishment*** (5). “As captain of my college soccer team I	***Boldness*** (6). “I consider myself a stu-	***Noblesse oblige*** (8). “I feel that as a Harvard student,	***Protestant work ethic*** (8). “I can see how one could

Lucretius course in which we are reading *De Rerum Natura* in its native Latin."	summer Latin and Greek Institute with the CUNY Graduate Center."	Japanese and S. African culture are quite different, the skill you must use to acclimatize to them is the same. That tool is the ability to not only open your mind, but to open your heart."	have leadership and organizational skills that I can bring to the [NGO]."	dent of the world. For that reason, I have a tendency to throw myself into the unknown. I do not frighten easily. The prospect of a challenge enlivens my senses. Adventures are the only experiences worth having. For without risk—one gains nothing."	as an American, but most importantly as a human being, it's my duty to contribute in whichever way in helping disadvantaged citizens of the world."	interpret this opportunity as a vacation, an escape from the daily grind of the workforce. However, I know where my heart lies, and I know that this position comes with a lot of responsibility that I'm willing to take on, regardless of the challenges."

Cosmopolitanism (9). "I represent your typical well-rounded cultural anthropologist to be who comes from a heritage of cultural sensitivity and tolerance, with the ability to not just adapt easily in new circumstances, but flourish among people of any culture."	***Bootstrapping*** (10). "The forecast looked bleak. I soon realized my options were to move home with my family and start life again from zero or I could look at the situation as an opportunity and start life again from zero somewhere else, somewhere I fell in love with a year ago when I visited on holi-	***Divine intervention*** (10). "When I researched the [NGO] summer program in South Africa, I knew that I had found my sabbatical "calling."	***Adaptability*** (11). "I claim not to have the ability to automatically adjust to the differences in culture and lifestyle; rather, but my prior experiences allow for a better transition in new environments."	***Positive thinking*** (11). "I am very optimistic, and while many people have told me this quality will only hurt me throug hout life, I think it will be beneficial in a developing nation."	***Singularity*** (14). "I have realized how important it is to lend a hand, but also how oblivious most American are to this need."	***Vanity*** (19). "[Microsoft Office is] entry level, and baby, I ain't entry level."

	day. I chose the latter and thrived.					

Appendix **2: Coding scheme: Representation of Other Populations**

Broad Category: Representation of Other Populations (241 occurrences)
Superordinate Category: Reciprocal Relationships (59 occurrences)

Equanimity (6). "If I'm given the opportunity to volunteer in [the host country], I will be prepared to be flexible and creative in a culture that I'm not completely familiar with."	***Historicizing/ contextualizing the other*** (6). "[The AIDS pandemic] is a complex, multifaceted issue that defies a simple solution. The government-advocated policy of ABC, Abstain, Be faithful, and Condomise, is a narrow, overly simplistic one."	***Humility*** (8). "Being an American, I do not fully comprehend the struggles still restricting [host country peoples] today. However, I'm anxious to learn."	***Embracing difference*** (39). "I would be an invitee into [the host country's] culture and would respect that position with compassion and hard work. . . . I would carry this knowledge and an open, alert mind with me so that I can fully absorb, appreciate, and excel in the opportunity I was given."

Superordinate Category: Othering (182 occurrences)
Subordinate Category: Domestic Other (23 occurrences)

Expand their horizons (3). "I would like to reach out to individuals, help them gain awareness, and make a positive change with their lives."	***Instilling values*** (3). "The bond between the students and me made me care even more deeply about inculcating in them the Christian principles I hold valuable."	***Role model*** (5). "[Twelve-year-old girls] looked up to me as an authority figure, as well as a friend and role model."	***Bootstrapping*** (6). "Lesson activities such as the one demonstrated above will better equip my students to know the power they possess within and the doors that will be made open to them if they believe in themselves and work hard."	***Self-esteem*** (6). "It is essential to be relaxed while teaching and be confident in the students. A student needs to know that you believe in them."

Subordinate Category: "Exotic" Other (159 occurrences)
Specific Category: Romanticizing (31 occurrences)

Happy natives (4). "Ghanaians are genuinely humble people . . . . Their soul is pure . . . . With their smiles, Ghanaians light up Western Africa."	***Going native*** (5). "I quickly knew that for this place to feel like home, I had to try to become one of the natives."	***Difference as adventure*** (11). "I bought an old bike to venture through [Spain] and gained my independence from the typical American hangouts."	***Orientalizing*** (11). "Since I was 10 years old, I have wanted to live in [the host country]. I anxiously checked the mail every week for the next *National Geographic* magazine, flipping through the pages, infatuated by the pictures of people and cultures that were so different than the white picket fence, suburban America I lived in."

Specific Category: Dehistoricizing (29 occurrences)

Lotto Logic (2). "I've been privileged with a wonderful life, and I desire to utilize this to its full potential, helping others who aren't so fortunate."	***On the veranda*** (7). "After taking a course at Amherst this past semester called African Education, I understand the complexities and problems of education in the underdeveloped world."	***Commonality*** (10). "We might have had completely different backgrounds but we had a common goal and that was enough to unite and drive us—a 17 year old Mexican/Puerto Rican girl and a 7 year old Chinese immigrant teaching each other."	***Surface understanding*** (10). "Through working with [the girl I knew for one day], I began to understand just how strong her desire to learn was, despite the absolute poverty and despair she and her family lived in."

Specific Category: Westernizing (44 occurrences)

Bootstrapping (4). "I want them to crave for learning with [sic] the instructor's absence; for them to truly see and embrace their potential with conviction, regardless of messages a neglectful government and scarcity of resources might send."	***Globalization*** (9). "I would like to become aware of [the host country's] needs in order to be informed as well as inform others about the different opportunities to deliver global social change."	***Empowerment*** (13). "While in the [host country] program, I hope to show the students that finding success as an individual, community, or country is not impossible."	***Westocentrism*** (18). "In the future I hope to work for a NGO that focuses on international development. At that point, I think my familiarity with educational systems in [the host country] and programs such as [the NGO] will be extremely important because education is a vital component of improving developing nations."

Specific category: Pathologizing (55 occurrences)

Voicelessness (4). "This community lived in social exclusion in public housing projects and I was there to conduct research for my thesis while volunteering as a youth advocate in their summer program. I adapted to their lifestyle and value system so that I could work as an advocate for them, to seek the services they deserve."	***Infantilizing*** (13). "With my presence, I will be able to remind the community and students that people, even from across the world, believe that things can and should be better, lives can be improved, and even the underprivileged need and deserve a real chance to succeed."	***State of disadvantage*** (15). "To teach in [the host country] would satisfy my persistent desire to reach out to a country whose [sic] racially charged social and economic challenges parallel the history of many African Americans."	***State of poverty*** (23). "Never have I looked extreme poverty in the eye. Never have I held the hand of an AIDS orphan."

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