

Whiteness in Development: A Critical Content Analysis of Peace Corps Marketing

Aurora Sartori
University of Arizona

Abstract

International volunteering has recently become a popular option for young people who have graduated from college and are seeking career opportunities, professional development, a sense of purpose, and adventure. This Critical Content Analysis (CCA) of a popular Peace Corps marketing campaign looks beyond the rhetoric of adventure, challenging dominant discourses on international volunteering and considering how this phenomenon might be contextualized within starkly racialized colonial histories and global systems of White dominance. Using Critical Whiteness Studies and Shannon Sullivan's (2006) notion of ontological expansiveness as a theoretical framework, this study explores how ideologies of Whiteness may inform perceptions of the Global South as they productively shape White people's desires to volunteer there. Primary findings of the analysis include that marketing materials tend to abstract the work of volunteering, that the Global South is singularly represented as a timeless rural space, and that volunteering is depicted as an individualistic journey of discovery. This research sheds light on how systems of global inequality are discursively maintained, and points towards the need to reframe how relationships across cultural, racial, and geographic lines are represented.

Keywords: race, privilege, white supremacy, research, global south, international volunteer programs, marketing, development

Aurora Sartori is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Students at the University of Arizona. Her research studies include school choice policy, educational equity for students classified as English language learners, and critical spatial analysis.

Over the last several decades, international volunteering has become an increasingly popular option for young people who have recently graduated from college and are looking for professional development, career opportunities, a sense of purpose, and adventure (Smith & Laurie, 2011). Marketed with phrases such as “Make the most of your world” (Peacecorps.gov), “Find your own adventure now!” (volunteeringolutions.com), and “Your adventure starts here” (www.experiencegla.com), volunteering abroad is widely imagined as a benevolent and humanitarian way to break from the ordinary, to seize life’s opportunities, and to broaden one’s horizons. The objective of this article, however, is to look beyond the rhetoric of adventure to trouble and complicate our understanding of international volunteering by considering how this phenomenon might be contextualized within a global development industry that itself is rooted in highly racialized colonial histories and situated within systems of global White dominance (Kothari, 2006). By analyzing how such programs are marketed to the public, this analysis considers the implicit understandings that are both called upon and constructed during the transaction between the prospective volunteer and the “call to service,” and explores how these might be related to Whiteness.

Specifically, my focus is on the U.S. Peace Corps, a federal volunteer program established by President John F. Kennedy in 1961. My reasons for choosing this program are both strategic and personal. Amidst a sea of organizations that offer volunteer opportunities, the Peace Corps is unique in its position as a federal agency, as well as in its historical longevity, extensive geographic reach, and iconic status in the national imagery of global development. Second, in

the spirit of transparency, I have long held complex and perhaps unresolved feelings about my own experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer in Namibia, where I served in the educational sector from 2006–2008. This research is therefore an opportunity for me to critically consider and contextualize my experiences as a volunteer, a personal history that also has provided useful insight into the subjectivity of prospective volunteers, as well as the actual functioning of the Peace Corps program on the ground.

In conducting a Critical Content Analysis (CCA) of selected Peace Corps marketing materials, the questions at the core of my inquiry are: (a) How do the marketing materials represent the act of volunteering? (b) Whose needs are being foregrounded in the Peace Corps advertising campaign? and (c) In what ways are the marketing materials reinforcing or challenging racialized Global North/Global South binaries? In reference to this last question, I use the term *Global South* as an imperfect way to refer to parts of the world outside of North America and Western Europe, to places that are often politically and/or culturally marginalized. Whereas *Third World* is an outdated Cold War-era term primarily referring to former colonies, and *developing countries* implies a teleology culminating in Western models, the language of Global South/Global North emphasizes geopolitical power relations (Dados & Connell, 2012; Tomlinson, 2003). North–South terminology has been taken up in fields like international relations, political science, development studies, and postcolonial sociology to name patterns of wealth, privilege, and development across broad regions (Dados & Connell, 2012).

Speaking from experience, I can say that many young people volunteer abroad for a multitude of reasons, one of them

being an attempt to ameliorate global inequities. However, the configuration of the development industry and the racialized identities of the volunteers may lead volunteers to unintentionally reinscribe the kinds of structures that support the very inequities that they are seeking to combat. Marketing materials have the power to shape volunteer expectations, providing a loose framework for how they might conceptualize their role and relationship to people they are serving; perhaps more importantly, such texts also reveal some of the underlying discourses that permeate the development industry in its entirety. This CCA of a Peace Corps marketing campaign is thus meant to contribute to a more multifaceted, nuanced, and critical awareness of how international volunteering programs and development projects are embedded within complex histories and situated within racialized global power dynamics.

Context

The Peace Corps

Several important studies have addressed the history of the Peace Corps, though with more of a focus on the program's impact on culture and discourse in the United States, rather than abroad. Schein's (2015) research critically examined how the Peace Corps invented the term *culture shock* to describe and define volunteers' adjustment to the transition of living in a different environment, and how this framework functioned to recast volunteers' experiences not as reactions to larger structural issues, but rather as individualized personal crises that ideally became personally meaningful transformations. Schein notes that *culture shock* came to describe what the volunteers experienced as they "grappled with the intimate realities of structural poverty,

American exceptionalism, racism, and colonialism," framing their unsettled discomfort "within a highly individualized, dehistoricized, and apolitical lens" (p.1111). Without overestimating the deterministic power of discourse, Schein writes that the overall effect of this widely circulated expressive paradigm was that volunteers were led to naturalize their "shock" upon confronting intense poverty and rampant structural inequality. Though Schein's research does revolve around the Peace Corps as it existed in the 1960s, the widespread popularity of the *culture shock* terminology and the Peace Corps' continued inclusion of this explanatory paradigm in their training materials makes it relevant for understanding how contemporary volunteers may make sense of their experiences.

In *Peace Corps Fantasies*, Geidel (2015) analyzes the ideological underpinnings of the 1960s Peace Corps, examining the rise of a hegemonic discourse of development that profoundly shaped the ways in which social change came to be imagined by policymakers, revolutionaries, volunteers, and "underdeveloped" communities. Echoing Schein's description of the wholesome "race- and class-blind volunteer" as an emissary of the "soft power" of the United States, Geidel traces the historical emergence of the heroic figure of the development worker as a rebranding of the late-nineteenth-century imperialist, describing volunteers as "seducing" Third World populations rather than conquering them. Geidel's description of the "seduction" of the Third World is firmly rooted in a larger critique of global capitalism, describing the Peace Corps' vision of development as one that operated through "gendered logics of desire and intimacy" (xv). Within this masculinist vision, progress was equated with leaving behind a "passive," feminized cultural

tradition and joining the “global brotherhood” of a transnational capitalist economy. The new regime of capitalist international development depended upon the creation of desiring subjects eager to consume commodities, thus motivating projects like the Peace Corps to “deliberately craft [...] an exceptionally enchanting vision, imbuing its own ventures and goals with magic and vitality while attempting to convince the ‘underdeveloped’ not just of their anachronism but of their dreary stagnation, and even their lack of imagination” (xvi). Indeed, according to Geidel, the 1960s development discourse identified poverty as a result of individuals’ lack of ingenuity rather than a collective experience of systemic oppression. Once again, the individualization of systemic and structural exploitation is a prominent feature of the Peace Corps ethos.

Though the Peace Corps continues to perpetuate the idea that poverty is endemic to places identified as developing nations, the program has evolved in important ways and does employ rhetoric and policy that actively work against explicitly paternalistic neocolonial connotations of foreign aid. Contemporary Peace Corps training materials define development as “any process that promotes the dignity of a people and their capacity to improve their own lives” (Kerkley & Jenkins, 2010, p. 2). The program model places a high priority on the needs and agency of local people, and envisions volunteers working within a sphere of influence that lies at the intersection of the national priorities of the host country, the stated needs of the local community, and Peace Corps programming (Kerkley & Jenkins, 2010). During their two-year service, volunteers live at similar economic levels as their hosts, are given training in the local language, and are instructed to build local capacity while

simultaneously imparting a better understanding of Americans among host country nationals (Kerkley & Jenkins, 2010). Indeed, many aspects of the program align with what Lough (2011) found to be characteristics of international volunteering programs that successfully increase the intercultural competence of volunteers: programs that are of longer duration, are immersive, and involve working with host communities to accomplish shared goals. Volunteers themselves often report feeling a strong sense of connection to their host communities, and more complex and nuanced understandings of poverty, privilege, and themselves (Peterson del Mar, 2011). Moreover, the responses of host communities to inquiries about their experiences with Peace Corps volunteers tend to be overwhelmingly positive (Kerkley & Jenkins, 2010), though little research has been done about the perceived effectiveness of projects undertaken by volunteers. There is obviously potential then for the Peace Corps to be a generally positive experience for both volunteers and their host communities. But how Whiteness shapes this experience and may contribute to unintended impacts for all involved warrants further analysis.

Critical Theory

In my analysis of a single Peace Corps marketing campaign, I employ Critical Whiteness Studies as my theoretical framework. Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) is a field of scholarship primarily concerned with locating circuits of power and the meaning of race within American culture and politics, with a particular emphasis on how Whiteness and racism are produced within institutions (Baldwin, 1985; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; DuBois, 1920; Harris, 1993; Mills, 1998). Within CWS, racism is understood as ultimately a White

problem, and therefore places Whiteness at the center of critique and transformation (Leonardo, 2013). With roots in the writings of Franz Fanon (1967) and W. E. B. DuBois (1920), CWS has no single authoritative founding document, but broadly speaking, there are several general principles that appear as common threads linking most scholarship in this field. Perhaps most importantly, Whiteness is understood as a social construct that functions as an invisible and largely unacknowledged center of power (Yancy, 2004). As an unmarked hegemonic norm, Whiteness dictates that all other racial “differences” are thus dialectically constituted against it. Moreover, within the social ontology of Whiteness, attempts to name Whiteness as a racial identity in and of itself are often actively disrupted, and efforts to highlight White people’s social, political, economic, and cultural investments in Whiteness are frequently met with substantial resistance (Sullivan, 2006; Yancy, 2004). Defying the common (White) understanding of racism and White supremacy as localized and contained within organizations like the KKK or individuals who use racial epithets, CWS call attention to the pervasive and ubiquitous privileging of Whiteness and the material consequences of this privilege (Fine, 1997; Leonardo, 2009; Yancy, 2004). As George Yancy (2004) writes:

Whiteness remains a synergistic system of transversal relationships of privileges, norms, rights, modes of self-perception and the perception of others, unquestioned presumptions, deceptions, beliefs, “truths,” behaviors, advantages, modes of comportment, and sites of power and hegemony that benefits

Whites individually and institutionally. (np)

As such, Whiteness is a complex, purposefully obfuscated, and actively maintained system of domination that affords Whites privileges, protections, and material advantages over People of Color (Leonardo, 2009; Lipsitz, 2006). Moreover, because this analysis concerns international volunteering, it is important to note the global nature of White dominance. As noted by numerous scholars of race (e.g., Allen, 2004; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 2017), through processes of colonization and neocolonization of non-White peoples by Europeans and Americans, multinational Whiteness has become a truly pervasive global force.

For my Critical Content Analysis (CCA) of Peace Corps marketing, I use CWS as an analytical lens in order to understand how ideologies of Whiteness may inform perceptions of the Global South as they productively shape White people’s desires to volunteer. Significantly, though the Peace Corps has made a concerted effort to recruit a racially diverse body of volunteers, as of September 2017 the majority (68%) of volunteers are still White (peacecorps.gov). Race, however, is virtually absent in scholarship on the Peace Corps or international development. While there have been numerous inquiries into the relationship between international development work and the history of colonialism (e.g., Escobar, 2011), there are very few scholars who directly address the issue of race in contemporary development work. Kothari (2006), one of the few who does address this issue, argues that the centrality of race to international development has largely been obscured, a concealment based upon the assumption that development takes place in nonracialized

spaces and beyond the realm of racial histories. Furthermore, Kothari (2006) warns that this silence on matters of race effectively conceals the complicity of development with racialized projects. This analysis, therefore, is an attempt to contribute to breaking this silence, and to better understand international development in relation to larger systems of White supremacy, albeit on a discursive, rather than material, level.

Because international volunteering necessarily involves the mobility of racialized bodies, practices, and ideas across global space, I use Sullivan's (2006) notion of *ontological expansiveness* as the framework for my analysis. A scholar of critical Whiteness, Sullivan (2006) defines *ontological expansiveness* as a White habit of lived spatiality that "considers all spaces as rightfully available for [White people's] inhabitation of them" (p. 144). Importantly, "space" as Sullivan conceives it, is not limited to its geographical component, but rather encompasses linguistic, psychical, economic, spiritual, and bodily spaces, among others. This extended understanding of space is useful for envisioning the multiple spheres through which domination can occur; for example, the fact that much of the Peace Corps' educational sector is taken up with the teaching of English rather than the support of Indigenous languages (an occupation of linguistic space), would be an important part of this analysis were I to focus more on programming, rather than marketing. Additionally, because Sullivan describes ontological expansiveness as a *habit*, an ingrained disposition that often exists beyond the realm of White people's critical awareness, this theoretical concept is useful for making sense of how advertisements operate, which similarly function on a preconscious level of emotion and desire.

For my analysis of Peace Corps marketing, the three tenets I took from Sullivan's (2006) work include:

- Space is perceived as open and racially neutral by White people: Though space is often "racially magnetized" into an outside and an inside, it is generally understood by White people to be a neutral, unconstituted void. As ontologically expansive, White people consider themselves to have the right to inhabit all spaces.
- The dialectical nature of space and race: There exists a transactional relationship between space and race, in which space productively racializes bodies and bodies racialize spaces. For example, in a store patronized by primarily White clients, the White bodies of the shoppers racialize the space of the store, making it a White space. Reciprocally, the store as a White space productively racializes those bodies as White, imbuing them with a social meaning attributed to Whiteness. Importantly, this transaction is not unique to the United States or the contemporary era; colonialism was in large part justified by the creation of "psychological-racial categories" of civilization and wildness, in which characteristics of a space seen as wild were attributed to the people who inhabited those spaces.
- Ethical solipsism: A viewpoint from which the interests, projects, desires, and values of the self are the only ones of any significance. This tenet adds important nuance to the way we think about volunteering and

altruistic work as whole, in that it underscores the insufficiency of good intentions in defining actions as ethical. In other words, living as if the meaning that one projects onto the world (one's good intentions) is the only meaning of any importance is a marker of White privilege, one that gives license to White people to transact as expansively and freely as they please.

This framework of CWS, and specifically ontological expansiveness, is useful in understanding how Whiteness may frame the ways in which volunteering abroad is conceptualized. The focus here is not so much on the act of volunteering itself, but rather the ways in which the experience is marketed to and imagined by those yet to serve abroad. The advertised representation of volunteering not only productively frames expectations, but also transacts with ideologies and values that prospective volunteers may already have. Studying advertisements, which are designed to reach viewers on an emotional, value-laden, subconscious level, is therefore an especially useful tool for uncovering the implicit ideologies that uphold and perpetuate White dominance.

Literature Review

Research that uses CWS as a theoretical framework for analyzing media is almost nonexistent, but one rare example of scholarship in this vein is Burton and Klemm's (2011) analysis of how ethnic minorities are portrayed in British travel brochures. Regarding travel brochures as a kind of ubiquitous cultural text that reveals information about the values of both consumers and advertisers, Burton and Klemm (2011) analyzed over 5,000 pages of brochures with an eye for the ideological underpinnings that serve to produce and

reproduce Whiteness.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the findings indicated that the brochures were implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) framed for a White readership. Images of non-White tourists were quite rare, with White people comprising 97.1% of depicted tourists (interestingly, the majority of non-White tourists depicted were women and children). Most of the nontourist workers, however, were Black staff who were depicted serving or entertaining White vacationers (Burton & Klemm, 2011). Indeed, the researchers found evidence of multiple ethnic stereotypes that strongly echoed postcolonial master-servant relationships, such as the hypersexualized Black male entertainer and the overall depiction of White people in higher status roles. Overall, non-White people in the brochures were overwhelmingly depicted as "part of the tourism product rather than tourists" (Burton & Klemm, 2011, p. 690).

While brochures may indeed be widely circulated, the growing salience of the online realm in shaping how people understand the world makes it an important area for researchers exploring the perpetuation and maintenance of discourses related to White dominance. In their critical discourse analysis of online teacher recruitment spaces, Ruecker and Ives (2015) examined textual and visual features of 59 websites recruiting for specific language schools located in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. The researchers frame their analysis in studies of native speakerism in English Language Teaching (ELT), a field of research that draws attention to the widespread belief (and resulting discrimination) that White native English speaker teachers represent Western culture and thus the ideals of both the English language and of teaching

methodologies (Ruecker & Ives, 2015, citing Holliday, 2005).

Like the findings of Burton and Klemm (2011), the conclusions reached in this critical discourse analysis of online teacher recruitment sites demonstrate the global dominance afforded Whiteness. The sites clearly constructed an ideal teacher who was young, White, enthusiastic, a native speaker of English, and came from a predominantly White country where English is the official language (Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Ruecker and Ives (2015) astutely point out that the schools and the recruitment sites that represented them were not simply marketing language education but a “metonymic connection to the social and economic power that comes with Western, White, first-world subject positionality” (p. 752). Such work makes it clear that White dominance can be perpetuated through subtle, insidious ways, via textual patterns that appear meaningful only when analyzed collectively.

Selection of Texts

Beginning in 2003, the Peace Corps embarked on a new advertising campaign, in large part motivated by a slow but consistent decline in applicants over the years. Whereas the previous campaigns (such as “The toughest job you’ll ever love”) had specifically targeted recent college graduates, the 2003 advertisements were intended to speak to a specific personality type, dubbed the “Unfulfilled Idealist” (Gale, 2007). This campaign, which used the tagline “Life is calling. How far will you go?” won a gold Effie award in 2005—the global advertising industry’s preeminent mark of distinction—and was purportedly responsible for a 20 percent increase in the total number of applicants over a nine-month period (Gale, 2007). My analysis,

therefore, centered on this campaign because of its fame, lasting impact, and ubiquity (the tagline still appears in university recruitment offices, as well as the official Peace Corps blog). In determining which images to include in the content analysis, my criteria were simply that the image was a Peace Corps marketing poster from the agency’s collection of Public Service Announcements on its official website (though the website was redesigned in June 2016, and previous marketing campaigns are no longer available there), and that it contained the “Life is calling” tagline. The final materials I analyzed consisted of eight different posters from the 2003 campaign (see Appendix).

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, my three units of analysis were the figure of the prospective volunteer (the target audience), the host community, and the ways in which space is constructed. To interweave theory and analysis (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), I first spent time looking at the texts and recording my initial responses, keeping in mind the theoretical tenets from Sullivan’s (2006) writings on ontological expansiveness. Because advertisements are designed to reach people on a subconscious level, intentionally targeting the viewer’s emotions and deeply held unquestioned values, this part of the analysis was important for trying to understand the kinds of immediate feelings that these texts can elicit.

Next, I turned my attention to each of my units of analysis. Together, these units broadly represent the components of the images most relevant to my research questions. For example, responding to the first research question, “How do the marketing materials represent the act of volunteering?” required paying careful attention to how the volunteer’s role is

depicted and the nature of his or her relationship to the host community. The second research question, “Whose needs are being foregrounded?” again entailed analyzing the relationship between the volunteer and the host community, as well as considering issues of focalization. The final research question, “In what ways are the marketing materials reinforcing or challenging racialized Global North/Global South binaries?” calls attention to the setting of the posters and what the images convey about the Global South. Thus, I used the following guiding questions to direct my observations about each unit of analysis, and to help me notice patterns and meaningful details that could then be used to answer my research questions:

- a) The volunteer: What are the assumptions made about the volunteer and the experience of volunteering? What benefits are proposed to the prospective volunteer? What is the nature of the relationship between the volunteer and host community? If volunteers are represented in the image, what are they doing? What is their race/gender/age?
- b) The host community: What is the mood/expression of people in the image, if people are depicted? If people are depicted, what is their race/age/gender and what kind of activity are they engaged in? How will the Peace Corps benefit the host community? How is the viewer positioned in relation to the people in the image?
- c) The construction of space: What are the characteristics of the setting (urban/rural, outdoor/indoors)? Are there features of the image that

connote modernity or historicity? What is the ambience? Are there people in the image?

One of the more challenging aspects of content analysis is the need to unambiguously define variables and values. Borrowing from Bell’s (2001) methodology for content analysis, I created three tables that were each focused around one of the units of analysis. Each table consisted of several variables (defined by one principal feature of representation), and notes on the different values each variable took for every poster. For example, within the variable “urbanicity,” under the unit of analysis “construction of space,” possible values included *urban* and *rural*. Because this was a Critical Content Analysis, the variables I chose as being semantically significant were explicitly guided by my analytic lens of CWS and ontological expansiveness.

Another source I used in conducting my analysis was Painter, Martin, and Unsworth’s (2013) scholarship on reading visual narratives. Though intended to provide methodological strategies for critically analyzing children’s picture books, the authors’ emphasis on pragmatic analysis tools and the ways in which power dynamics structure a reader’s interaction with a text made certain aspects of their methodological framework quite relevant for this study. More specifically, this framework informed my analysis of the construction of space (third unit of analysis).

After all my observations were collected, I read through each of the tables, noting both patterns and aberrations. These patterns were then condensed, synthesized, and elaborated upon to become three broad, overarching themes. Though this description portrays my analysis as straightforward and linear, I must note that in reality the process

was much more iterative, as I frequently jumped between the various texts I was using, refining, deleting, and adding variables throughout the process.

Findings

The work of volunteering abroad is abstracted.

The first theme that emerged from the analysis was that the actual tasks and work assigned to volunteers are mostly left to the imagination. The language used in the posters employs vague phrasing, mentioning that volunteers have “a desire to help,” and would be engaged in “making a difference.” This trend is manifested visually as well. Except for Figure 2, none of the images directly signify the various sectors in which Peace Corps volunteers work: education, health, the environment, youth in development, community economic development, and agriculture (peacecorps.gov). Instead, images like Figure 1 depict a lone child playing, while others portray a solitary moment of quiet contemplation (Figure 3) or merely scenic landscapes (Figures 7 & 8). In fact, only one poster (Figure 5) portrays a volunteer interacting with the host community.

As previously mentioned, the one exception to this elision of Peace Corps work is Figure 2, which depicts two children in what appears to be a classroom, indexing the educational work that volunteers do. It is significant that only the educational sector would be represented, as this is the Peace Corps’ largest program area, with 41% of volunteers serving as classroom teachers or teacher-trainers (peacecorps.gov). As Figure 2 portrays students in a shadowy classroom with no instructor, the image encourages viewers to imagine themselves at the head of the classroom. Clearly missing from Figure

2 are the professional teachers who already live and work in these communities. Importantly, the Peace Corps does not require that educational volunteers have a teaching certificate or even a background in education (peacecorps.gov), meaning that volunteers’ qualifications to teach may be limited to an undergraduate degree in any field, English language fluency, and their enthusiasm. This image (like Figure 6) thus represents the people of the Global South as children beseeching tutelage from those whose primary qualification is not their expertise, but rather their Americanness. Through the lens of ontological expansiveness, this image can be interpreted as an invitation for volunteers to take up the position of teacher and thereby occupy the space of knowledge production, a position that is represented as vacant.

Another poster worth discussing in depth is that of Figure 4, which portrays a gleeful volunteer hanging from a signpost and peering directly at the viewer. Perhaps the most explicitly touristic image of the bunch, this poster clearly represents the Peace Corps as more an opportunity to have a diverting adventure rather than to engage in substantive endeavors or participate in meaningful cross-cultural experiences. The volunteer’s freedom of movement—his ability to live expansively—is both literally and metaphorically emphasized as he takes hold of a signpost pointing to various destinations. Notably, the signpost points in two distinct directions that clearly reflect a Global North/Global South binary: to the right lies Mt. Kilimanjaro, Dar Es Salaam, Nairobi, Mombasa, and to the left are the cities of Cairo, Rome, London, New York. This image reifies an understanding of the globe as neatly divided in two, a bifurcation intricately bound up with histories of imperialism and categories of self and

Other, center and periphery (Said, 1993; Sullivan, 2006).

Just as the work of the Peace Corps is abstracted in the “Life is calling” campaign, how the Peace Corps may benefit host communities is similarly quite ambiguous. Through both image and text, the posters communicate that joining the Peace Corps affords volunteers the following benefits: travel and adventure (visiting a new and exciting—i.e., exotic—place), an increased ability to help communities “at home,” self-knowledge, a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, an opportunity to develop “real-world skills and experience,” and, of course, the opportunity to “make a difference.” Benefits to the host community, however, are limited to social bonding with the volunteer (Figures 1 & 5), connections with the wider globe (Figure 2), and salvation for vulnerable-looking children (Figure 6). For posters such as those in Figures 3, 7, and 8, this category was especially difficult to analyze, as the images foreground picturesque landscapes instead of people.

The textual deletion of the actual work of Peace Corps service, together with the clear emphasis on benefits to the volunteer over benefits to the host community, could be interpreted as an illustration of ethical solipsism (Sullivan, 2006). As recruitment tools, it is expected that the posters would aim to “sell” the Peace Corps experience to prospective volunteers, but the near-absolute erasure of the host communities from marketing materials legitimates a single-minded focus on the volunteer’s own needs, desires, and interests. Additionally, related to Sullivan’s (2006) assertion that space is often perceived as open and racially neutral to White people, posters that depict largely unpeopled landscapes contribute to a White

understanding of the Global South as empty and untouched, a blank space awaiting intervention. This is discussed in more depth in the following theme.

The Global South is represented as an exotic, wild land untouched by time.

The second theme became apparent after collectively analyzing how space is constructed in each of the posters. While many Peace Corps volunteers do indeed serve in rural locations, the universal depiction of countries of service as *only* rural is a gross misrepresentation. Additionally, the fact that there is not a single illustration of technology or infrastructure (such as roads, highways, running water, or electricity) is problematic in that it represents all of the Global South as unindustrialized and untouched by modernity. This lack of urbanicity or industrialization is further emphasized by the multiple visual markers of a place steeped in history: the time-softened earthen walls in Figure 1, the weathered wood and style of dress in Figure 5, the ancient-looking crumbling wall in Figure 3, and the worn blackboard and rough, unfinished window casing in Figure 2. This temporal distance conjures up a common teleological trope within discourses of development at large, a paradigm of development as *modernization*, which imagines societies as evolving along a universal linear trajectory, from simple to more complex (Boudon & Bourricaud, 1989). Positioning the Global South as existing in the past, therefore, indexes a familiar, paternalistic colonial logic that, as Sullivan (2006) writes, creates a “binary division between a civilized ‘us’ from a wild ‘them’” (p. 150), a division that both justifies and creates a need for Western intervention.

The ambience, or emotional tenor, of the images also contributes to this sense that the Global South exists in a different era and is a place entirely distinct from the United States. As Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013) assert, images with fully saturated colors communicate a sense of excitement and vitality, while muted colors create a mood that is either foreboding and gloomy (muted and dark) or gentle and optimistic (muted and light). *Familiarity* refers to the degree of color differentiation. A wider array of distinct colors is perceived as being more lifelike and familiar (since we generally view the world in full color), while a restricted color palette implies a reduced “certainty” or realism, creating the feeling that an image depicts something that is somehow removed from everyday life (Painter et al., 2013). All but two of the images displayed muted colors and restricted palettes, giving the sense that the countries of service are strange “other” spaces. Interestingly, a higher degree of visual familiarity is correlated to posters emphasizing that Peace Corps service equips volunteers with tangible skills that they can use upon returning to their home communities. Thus, a pragmatic, real-world approach to volunteer benefits is visually manifested as true-to-life colors.

In addition to (a) depicting the Global South as existing in the past, and (b) the use of muted colors and restricted palettes to mark these spaces as unfamiliar, the posters also (c) employ techniques of focalization to position the viewer as a distant observer. While images that depict characters gazing directly at the viewer create a moment of contact that invites participation, identification, and empathy, images that lack that direct eye contact position the viewer as a mere observer of the depicted participant (Painter et al., 2013). Of the images depicting nonvolunteers (Figures

1, 2, 3, 5, & 6), all but one of the images are shown facing away from the viewer, in profile, or with their faces downturned. Only the image in Figure 6, which depicts two Black children looking at the viewer with wide pleading eyes, uses contact focalization to directly engage the viewer, a strategic technique clearly intended to elicit empathy and concern. The tagline of the image, “The corner office can wait. Some corners of the world can’t,” explicitly positions the viewer, a prospective volunteer, as a future savior of these children, who are ostensibly in ambiguous danger and/or desperate need. It is worth noting as well that “corners of the world” immediately conjures up a global spatiality in which there is a clear center—the United States, where volunteers originate—and definitive peripheries, which are home to vulnerable Black children. Indeed, the very fact that the three posters of children (Figures 1, 2, & 6) lack any sign of adults to care for them contributes to this sense of the Global South as a place without adult guidance, in need of American caregivers, protectors, and educators.

Overall, the imagery used to market the Peace Corps generally lacks any substantive representation of the communities that live in the places where Peace Corps volunteers work. Figure 5, portraying a warm moment of learning between a volunteer and two people wearing headscarves, is a notable exception in that it is the only poster to depict interaction between a volunteer and the host community. The societies among which volunteers would be living and working to benefit are otherwise glaringly absent. Two of the posters (Figures 7 & 8) depict unpeopled landscapes, two depict lone figures in the distance (Figures 1 & 3), and two depict pairs of children (Figures 2 & 6). When taken together, one is left with a strong impression that the Global South is a

largely unpeopled (at least by adults), rural place—a sentiment that effectively invites volunteers to engage in ontological expansiveness, to interpret their future host countries as empty of cultural or historical meaning, needing direction, waiting to be brought out of the past and into the future.

Volunteering is a journey of discovery.

This third and final theme reflects how the volunteer's interaction with the spaces and people of host communities is construed as an exciting process of discovery. From increased self-knowledge to a renewed sense of purpose, every poster visually and linguistically communicates that service in the Peace Corps is an experience that enables the volunteer to unearth something hidden and deeply meaningful. Figure 5, perhaps the best example of this theme, features two local individuals and a volunteer bathed in warm, sepia-toned light, seated inside a dwelling and surrounded by rough painted pillars formed from tree trunks. The volunteer is being taught to sift grain by the two-smiling people, and the tagline reads, "Funny how someone you've yet to meet can teach you a lot about who you are." An out-of-focus column in the foreground positions the viewer as an outsider, peering into the intimate space. The image clearly intimates that through volunteering one can gain entry into such rarified, almost magical interior spaces—both literally conceptualized as intimate indoor spaces, and figuratively as interior spaces of self-knowledge. Though increased self-awareness can indeed be an important benefit of volunteering, encouraging volunteers to see host country communities as merely a mirror for the self-echoes an individualistic perspective that obscures the needs, desires, and concerns of (racialized) others.

In a similar vein, Figure 7 displays text that rises with the mist over lush green hills, reading, "The difference between a career and a purpose is about 8,000 miles."

The prospective volunteer's home country (the United States) thus is equated with work, a career, while the Global South becomes a place of adventure and meaning, where one discovers one's life purpose. Within this adventure space, a massive jungle occupies the entire frame, with the roof of a single house peeking out from between the branches. Figure 8 similarly depicts one tiny home, isolated and dwarfed by the verdant landscape around it. Notably, neither of these images depict the people who live in these homes, allowing prospective volunteers to imagine these spaces as vacant and unclaimed. Together, the images of lush greenery overwhelming fragile human establishments simultaneously communicate a sense of wildness and opportunity, depicting the Global South as an untamed and largely untouched frontier, perhaps awaiting Western conservation efforts or capitalist ventures. This depiction of Peace Corps service as discovery of the wild clearly resonates with long-established discourses that understood colonial territories as "realms of possibility" for Westerners; contemporary iterations of these discourses continue to position the Global South as a space of play and exploration (Said, 1993, p. 64).

As it is imagined here, the Global South exists primarily in relation to the volunteer's needs and desires, once again reaffirming what Sullivan (2006) refers to as an ethically solipsistic perspective. Figure 3, with the tagline, "What do you do when your desire to help is larger than your zip code?" similarly promises volunteering abroad as an answer to larger existential

questions; though the text that follows, “You go to Morocco, Mongolia, or 71 other countries,” makes it clear that it is the act of traveling, not the destination itself, that is relevant. Figure 4, depicting the volunteer climbing a signpost pointing the direction to cities around the world, similarly echoes this sentiment. While travel can certainly be a valuable way to learn about the world and oneself, selling the Peace Corps as a vacation—albeit one that comes with a bonus of helping others—sets up prospective volunteers to focus on their own enjoyment and sense of self-worth rather than to consider how they might support host country nationals or combat global inequities most effectively.

Discussion

The “Life is calling” posters perpetuate a Global North/Global South binary by selecting portrayals of the Global South designed to strike prospective volunteers as excitingly exotic (such as jungles, traditional villages, and rust-colored earthen walls by the sea) rather than depicting more familiar settings where Peace Corps volunteers work and live (in cities and towns, computer labs, agricultural fields, etc.) By representing the Global South as exotic, anachronistic, and undeveloped, the 2003 Peace Corps marketing campaign repackages imperialist tropes of exploration and paternalistic aid as American altruism and youthful adventure. In relation to the second tenet of Sullivan’s (2006) theory of ontological expansiveness—the dialectical nature of space and race—this depiction of the Global South as a sparsely populated rural wilderness has further implications for how the people who live in those spaces are conceptualized and, therefore, treated. Within colonial logics, the reciprocal definition of wild and savage spaces was

used to justify the violent domination of American Indians and African Americans who were seen as uncivilized (Sullivan, 2006). While I am not equating volunteering abroad with colonial violence, it is worth considering how residual colonial discourses may still inform contemporary work abroad by shaping how relationships between parties are structured, and how social change is imagined. Though “development” is widely understood as “improvement,” it can also be a way of obscuring racist and colonial practices under the rhetoric of promoting “modernization” (Sullivan, 2006). Thus, while the prevailing images of scenically pastoral spaces and brown-skinned people in traditional dress used to market the Peace Corps may seem innocuous on the surface, when left unchallenged, they rein scribe a false spatio-temporal dichotomy that perpetuates imperialist relationships between the Global North and the Global South.

Clearly the ability of advertisements to communicate complex, nuanced meanings is limited by the very genre, which is designed to strategically deliver powerful messages in a direct, streamlined manner. Despite this limitation, one would imagine that there should be some degree of alignment between those high-impact messages and the ostensible ethos of an organization. Structurally, the Peace Corps prides itself on cooperative partnerships and collaborative engagement with host communities (Kerkley & Jenkins, 2010). Projects undertaken by volunteers are supposed to be driven by the needs of the host community, and collaborative leadership is upheld as the model of program organization. As described in the findings, however, depictions of agentic host communities and their interactions with volunteers are largely missing from this ad campaign.

Indeed, discourses surrounding international volunteering are rife with contradictions, allying themselves with notions of collective global citizenship while simultaneously embodying neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility and improvement (Smith & Laurie, 2011). Whether this disjuncture between the messages of the Peace Corps ad campaign and its official program model is an unintentional paradox or a strategic way to appeal to prospective volunteers' more individualistic desires is unclear. The functionality of this visual narrative, however, is less ambiguous; when marketing materials prime volunteers to conceptualize their service as an individual journey of discovery and adventure rather than a collective endeavor directed by the host community, these advertisements effectively license volunteers to engage in an ethical solipsism that prioritizes their own goals, desires, and humanity over those of the communities for which they are allegedly working. Thus, an obvious but important implication of this research is that more careful thought needs to be given to the ways that the Peace Corps is marketed, so that it reflects solidarity, mutual aid, and collective engagement rather than solipsistic, adventurous "volun-tourism." As noted by postcolonial theorist Edward Said (1993), the struggle over geography is not just about the land, but also over ideas, cultural forms, and images. Thus, the narratives communicated about the Global South and the kinds of structured feelings these narratives produce have far-reaching ramifications and can function to either maintain or disrupt a global order rooted in White supremacy.

Discourses, understood here as the underlying structures that produce texts, are dynamic, contradictory, and highly unstable (Mills, 1997). As such contested sites of

meaning, they are thus fertile ground for intervention, change, and transformation. By drawing discursive connections between White expansive spatiality, racialized colonial histories, and Peace Corps marketing, this analysis is intended to denaturalize some of the underlying logics that show up in texts used to market international volunteering. Though they may seem innocuous on the surface, these logics function to maintain the very systems of oppression that programs like the Peace Corps ostensibly seek to undermine. Ultimately, the objective of such research is to think more deeply about the insidious ways that White supremacy is maintained, and thus to more effectively find ways to throw off balance the "invisible center" (Yancy, 2004) of Whiteness.

As deeply ingrained ways of being that are often not entirely conscious, habits of White privilege can be difficult to detect, let alone change (Sullivan, 2006). That systems of White dominance precede us and may at times operate on a subconscious level, however, does not negate the fact that these systems are actively recreated by Whites both institutionally and individually on a daily basis (Leonardo, 2009). Dismantling these systems thus requires both personal and structural transformation, and White people need to be held and hold themselves accountable for such changes. In the context of volunteering abroad, the possibility may still exist that White spatial privilege might be utilized as an effectively antiracist tool; I certainly do not wish to use the fear of exacerbating neoimperialist relationships between the Global North and Global South as an argument that we should do nothing to combat structural inequality. I only suggest that such work must be done carefully, guided by robust critical thought and at the direction of those one seeks to support.

Conclusion

By consistently misrepresenting the Global South as a wild, unilaterally rural place that exists outside of time, the “Life is calling” marketing campaign implicitly reaffirms a White, imperialist mode of spatiality that primes prospective volunteers to see themselves as rugged explorers rather than as humble collaborators. The campaign’s focus on volunteering as a journey of personal transformation similarly encourages a neoliberal perspective focused on continuous self-improvement. This is not particularly surprising, given that the Peace Corps has a legacy of perpetuating “development fantasies” aimed at curtailing the transformative politics that arose in so many newly independent nation states after World War II, and encouraging activists to imagine social change as personal transformation rather than economic justice or political self-determination (Geidel, 2015).

While advertisements may not directly determine the outcome of development projects like the Peace Corps, they both influence and illustrate the ways that relationships across geographic, cultural, and racial lines are conceptualized. Violence and cultural eradication have historically been an inherent aspect of “modernization programs” (Geidel, 2015), and while development practices and the Peace Corps have evolved in important ways, this campaign’s depiction of the Global South as a wild landscape untouched by modernity, largely emptied of the peoples who reside there, primes volunteers to participate in this cultural eradication. At the very least, these images facilitate the process of imagining development as occurring within a neutral space, instead of one that is inherently racialized, marked with significant colonial histories, and populated

by diverse and complex communities. Changing the marketing materials may or may not directly affect the actual program, but it would certainly be an important first step toward interrupting the kinds of naturalized logics that support global White dominance and perpetuate deeply entrenched structural inequality.

References

- Allen, R. L. (2004). Whiteness and critical pedagogy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 36(2), 121–136.
- Baldwin, J. (1985). *The price of the ticket: Collected nonfiction, 1948–1985* (1st ed., Black thought and culture). New York: St. Martin's/Marek.
- Beach, R., Enciso, P., Harst, J., Jenkins, C., Raina, S., Rogers, R., Short, K., Sung, Y., Wilson, M., & Yenika-Agbaw, V. (2009). Exploring the “critical” in critical content analysis of children’s literature. In K. M. Leander, D. W. Rowe, D. K. Dickinson, M. K. Hundley, R. T. Jiménez, & V. J. Risko (Eds.), *58th yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 129–143). Oak Creek, WI: NRC.
- Bell, P. (2001). Content analysis of visual images. In T. Van Leeuwen & C. Jewitt (Eds.), *Handbook of visual analysis*. London: SAGE.
- Boudon, R., & Bourricaud, F. (1989). *A critical dictionary of sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burton, D., & Klemm, M. (2011). Whiteness, ethnic minorities and advertising in travel brochures. *The Service Industries Journal*, 31(5), 679–693.
- Dados, N., & Connell, R. (2012). The global south. *Contexts*, 11(1), 12–13.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (1997). *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1920). *Darkwater: Voices from within the veil*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Escobar, A., (2011). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white masks*. New York: Grove Press.
- Fine, M. (1997). *Off white: Readings on race, power, and society*. New York: Routledge.
- Gale, T. (2007). Life is calling. How far will you go? campaign. *Encyclopedia of Major Marketing Campaigns*. Retrieved from <http://www.encyclopedia.com/marketing/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/peace-corps>
- Geidel, M. (2015). *Peace Corps fantasies: How development shaped the global sixties*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, 106, 1707–1791.
- Holliday, A. (2005). *The struggle to teach English as an international language*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, A., & Mazzei, L. (2012). *Thinking with theory in qualitative research*. New York: Routledge.
- Kerkley, J., & Jenkins, S. (2010). The impact of Peace Corps service on host communities and host country perceptions of Americans. In *Peace Corps Office of Strategic Information, Research, and Planning*. Retrieved from http://files.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/opengov/impact_of_PC_service.pdf
- Kothari, U. (2006). Critiquing “race” and racism in development discourse and practice. *Progress in Development Studies*, 6(1), 1–7.
- Leonardo, Z. (2009). *Race, whiteness and education*. New York: Routledge.
- Leonardo, Z. (2013). *Race frameworks: A multidimensional theory of racism and education*. New York: Teachers College.
- Lipsitz, G. (2006). *The possessive investment in whiteness how white people profit from identity politics* (Rev. and expanded ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lough, B. J. (2011). International volunteers’ perceptions of intercultural competence. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(4), 452–464.
- Mills, C. W. (1998). *Whiteness visible*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mills, C. W. (2017). *Black rights/white wrongs: The critique of racial liberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mills, S. (1997). *Discourse: The new critical idiom*. New York: Routledge.
- Painter, C., Martin, J. R., & Unsworth, L. (2013). *Reading visual narratives: Image analysis of children’s picture books*. Sheffield, UK: Equinox.
- Peace Corps. *Life is calling. How far will you go?* [online images]. Retrieved February 3, 2016, from <https://www.peacecorps.gov>
- Peterson del Mar, D. (2011). At the heart of things: Peace Corps volunteers in Sub-Saharan Africa. *African Identities*, 9(4), 349–361.
- Ruecker, T., & Ives, L. (2015). White native English speakers needed: The rhetorical construction of privilege in online teacher recruitment spaces. *TESOL Quarterly*, 49(4), 733–756.

- Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Knopf.
- Schein, R. (2015). Educating Americans for “overseasmanship”: The Peace Corps and the invention of culture shock. *American Quarterly*, 67(4), 1109–1136.
- Smith, M., & Laurie, N. (2011). International volunteering and development: Global citizenship and neoliberal professionalisation today. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 36(4), 545–559.
- Sullivan, S. (2006). *Revealing whiteness: The unconscious habits of racial privilege*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Tomlinson, B. R. (2003). What was the Third World? *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38(2), 307–321.
- Yancy, G. (2004). *What white looks like: African-American philosophers on the whiteness question*. New York: Routledge.

Appendix
Peace Corps Marketing Posters

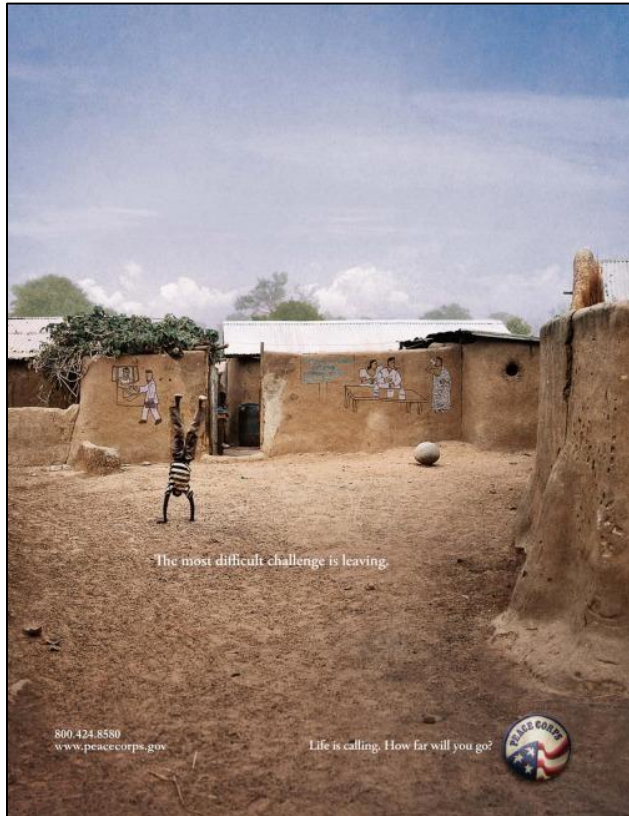
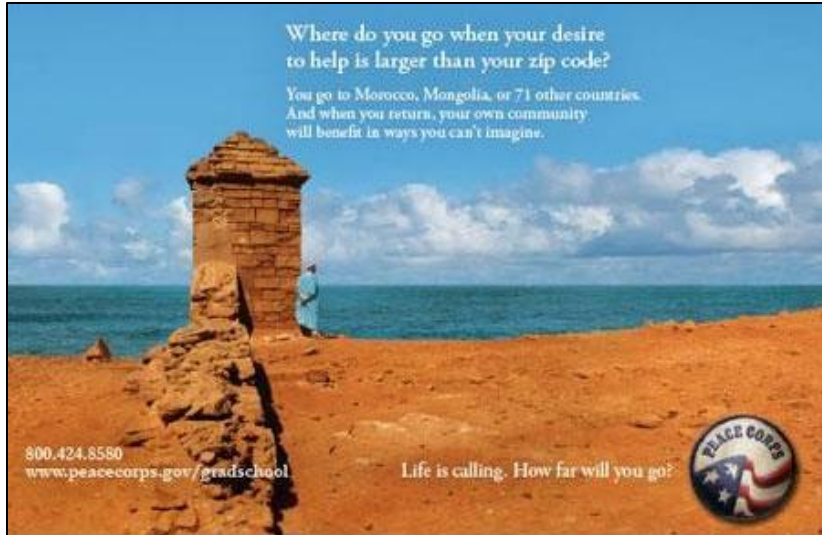


Figure 1. "The most difficult challenge is leaving."
(Peacecorps.gov)



Figure 2. "What happens in Botswana doesn't stay in Botswana."
(Peacecorps.gov)



Where do you go when your desire to help is larger than your zip code?

You go to Morocco, Mongolia, or 71 other countries. And when you return, your own community will benefit in ways you can't imagine.

800.424.8580
www.peacecorps.gov/gradschool

Life is calling. How far will you go?



Figure 3. "Where do you go when your desire to help is larger than your zip code? You go to Morocco, Mongolia, or 71 other countries. And when you return, your own community will benefit in ways you can imagine." (Peacecorps.gov)



Figure 4. Volunteer climbing signpost. (Peacecorps.gov)

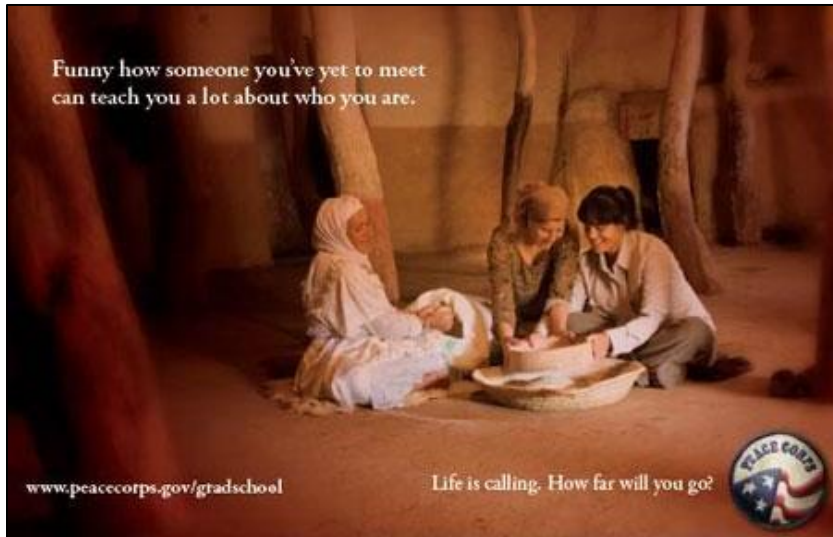


Figure 5. "Funny how someone you've yet to meet can teach you a lot about who you are." (Peacecorps.gov)

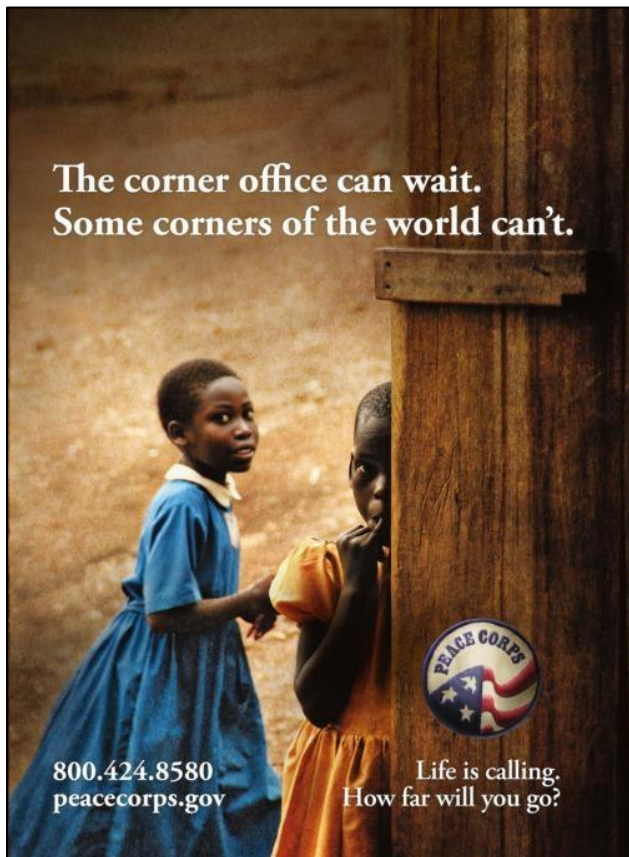


Figure 6. "The corner office can wait. Some corners of the world can't." (Peacecorps.gov)

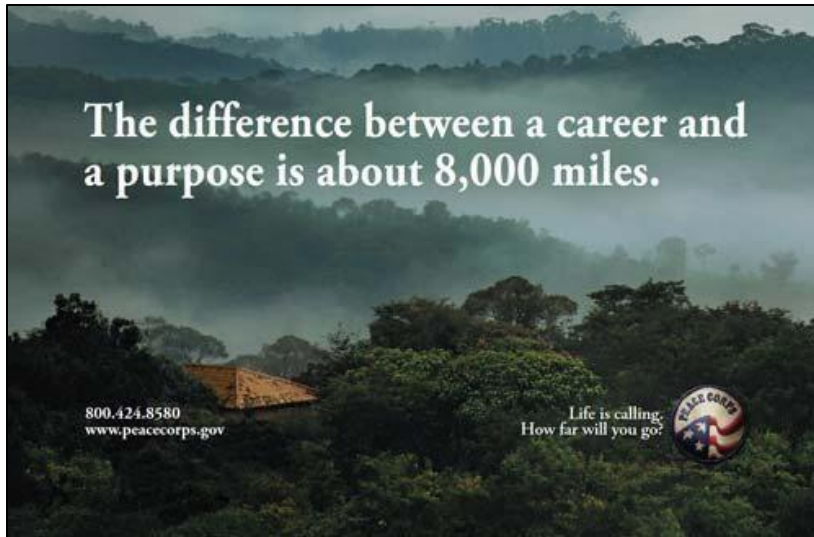


Figure 7. "The difference between a career and a purpose is about 8,000 miles." (Peacecorps.gov)

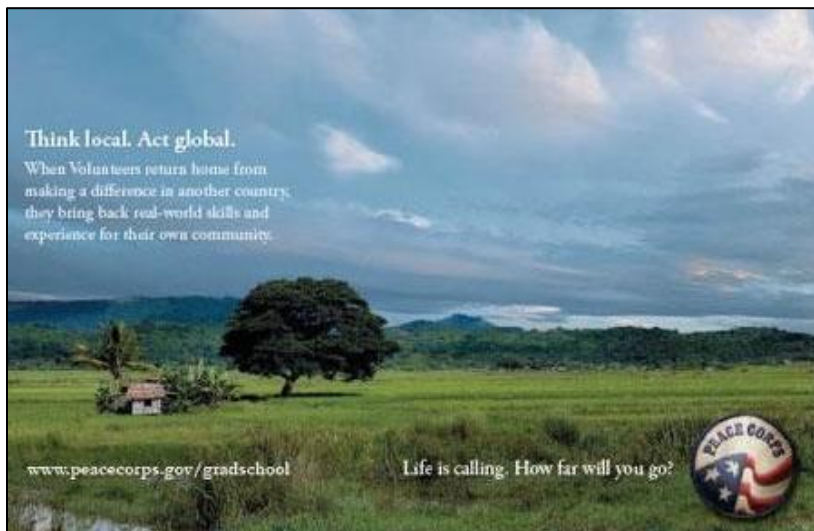


Figure 8. "Think local. Act global. When Volunteers return home from making a difference in another country, they bring back real-world skills and experience for their own community." (Peacecorps.gov)