Jenna N. Hanchey, "Constructing 'American Exceptionalism': Peace Corps Volunteer Discourses of Race, Gender, and Empowerment," in Volunteering and Communication Volume II: Studies in International and Intercultural Contexts, eds. Michael W. Kramer, Laurie K. Lewis, & Loril M. Gossett (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2015), 233-250.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Constructing "American Exceptionalism": Peace Corps Volunteer Discourses of Race, Gender, and Empowerment

JENNA N. HANCHEY
The University of Texas at Austin

Many scholars consider American exceptionalism to be "one of the most, if not *the* most, important narratives that pervade contemporary American culture" (Edwards, 2012, p. 366). However, it is often only considered in relation to a small range of topics: American foreign policies that lead to war, military build-up, or invasive action (Motter, 2010; Patman, 2006; Rojecki, 2008). The importance of this narrative is beginning to be analyzed in media culture as well (Rojecki, 2008; Söderlind, 2011), but there remain large sectors of U.S. American[1] life where the impact of American exceptionalism[2] is under-theorized. This study analyzes the way that American exceptionalism is reinforced and reconstructed in the discourse of returned Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs).[3]

The idea that U.S. Americans are somehow "exceptional" is both an assumption guiding the mission of the Peace Corps and a point of fundamental tension for volunteers (Fischer, 1998). Cobbs Hoffman (1998) describes how the Peace Corps was started at a time when there was a "widespread belief that American norms represented the pinnacle of progress and were self-evidently good" (p. 25). This belief in U.S. exceptionality allows for it to empower other countries—to help others develop—underlies the U.S. Peace Corps to some extent, even today

(Cobbs Hoffman, 1998), and acts as a common thread running throughout RPCV descriptions of their experience living and working for two years in host countries. However, when discursively (re)constructed in conversation, the myth of American exceptionalism becomes a point of struggle. When RPCVs encounter challenges to American exceptionalism, they face contradictions through the hidden assumptions within its use: whiteness, masculinity, and national superiority.

In narrating their experiences, "[p]eople draw on gendered, heteronormative, classed, raced and colonial discourses to…justify their action or inaction and make sense of the things that happen to them in organizational life" (Baines, 2010, p. 120). RPCVs are no exception. In their descriptions of time spent abroad, Peace Corps volunteers draw on these discourses as a sensemaking aid. This study examined how discursive access to U.S. American exceptionalism often requires re-inscriptions of whiteness, masculinity, and an imperial attitude toward the host country.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND ITS INTERSECTIONS

American exceptionalism is an ideological myth that underlies much of U.S. American discourse and public life. It "evokes attitudes of national autonomy and superiority" (Ivie & Giner, 2009, p. 360) by construing the "United States [as] unique among, if not superior to, other nation-states" (Edwards, 2012). Based in "a pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability and superiority of the country's founding liberal principles" (Patman, 2006, p. 964), American exceptionalism provides a "conviction that the USA has a special destiny among nations" (Patman, 2006, p. 964), particularly because of its purportedly superior morality.

The sense of the U.S. as a "morally elevated" nation (Ivie & Giner, 2009, p. 361) gives rise to a logic allowing for intervention in other countries. The idea of the U.S. as a "shining city on a hill" has pervaded public discourse for centuries, leaving "little doubt that the USA has continued to think of itself as a special nation…with a moral and religious mission to the world" (Patman, 2006, p. 965). This legitimizes foreign intervention, as the U.S. sees itself as coming from a higher moral position, one that grants the right to arbitrate international disputes, fix other nations' problems, and invade and attack other peoples. The invocation of U.S. moral superiority constructs the national other as morally bereft in comparison, and allows for the U.S. to rationalize its intervention as necessary and just.

American exceptionalism also allows for an unquestioningly positive construction of humanitarian aid. Patman (2006) notes that "a sense of exceptionalism inspired the USA…to embark on a quest to improve the world" (p. 965), a quest that often includes humanitarian projects. Although many U.S. humanitarian

interventions have positive implications, others promote military goals under the guise of aid. As Motter (2010) examines, the possibility for "humanitarian militarism emerges from an exceptionalist rhetoric of compassionate generosity" (p. 509). Relying on a similar sense of elevated morality, the discursive underpinnings of U.S. militarism and humanitarianism are quite similar. As Söderlind (2011) argues, American exceptionalism "inflects every discourse involving relations between the United States and its—internal as well as external—others" (p. 9).

However, at the moment, most studies have only focused on U.S. *public* discourse regarding American exceptionalism, and have ignored how it is negotiated and constructed through everyday discourse. As the face of the U.S. to many people around the world, Peace Corps volunteers discursively display how American exceptionalist ideas play out in practical interactions with national others. Although scholars have examined the way that explicit or implicit appeals to American exceptionalism are used in order to garner public support for foreign policies or action, few have examined how those foreign policies are enacted. This study provides insight into the negotiation of American exceptionalist ideologies in practice by examining how the ideological pillars of American exceptionalism are reinforced on a day-to-day basis in Peace Corps volunteer discourse.

The Peace Corps Volunteer: Where Exceptionalism Meets Humanitarian Aid

Patman (2006) argues that "soft power" is more important than ever in maintaining a hegemonic idea of American exceptionalism, and "soft power" in foreign policy is something with which the Peace Corps has often been associated (Cobbs Hoffman, 1998). The Peace Corps is an independent U.S. government organization that has sent over 215,000 volunteers to 139 countries in the past 50 years to serve for two-and-a-half years (Peace Corps, 2014). Begun in 1961 by John F. Kennedy, the institution of the Peace Corps responded to exigencies of the Cold War, the rise of the so-called Third World, and unflattering portrayals of U.S. Americans abroad (Cobbs Hoffman, 1998; Fischer, 1998). Volunteers "and their altruism put a positive face on global interventionism" (Cobbs Hoffman, 1998, p. 7), with the hope of making international friends for the nation (Fischer, 1998).

However, the Peace Corps has just as big of an influence on the U.S. national imaginary as it does any other nation (Cobbs Hoffman, 1998). As such, "the Peace Corps is perhaps one of our clearest windows onto the abiding tension in the United States between a foreign policy of self-aggrandizement and a foreign policy that promotes the values of democracy and peace" (Cobbs Hoffman, 1998, p. 4). Examining Peace Corps volunteer discourse provides a particularly interesting perspective on the contradictions inherent in an enactment of American

exceptionalism for the benefit of other nations. Volunteer discourse also reveals an oft-missed part of American exceptionalism: "[H]ow exceptionalist rhetorics function as a motive for American global hegemony when no evil enemy is in sight" (Motter, 2010, p. 509).

Postcolonial Perspectives

The nationalistic discourse underlying American exceptionalism can be examined using postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory is an interdisciplinary field of study which is "committed to theorizing the problematics of colonization and decolonization" (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 250), with an explicit commitment to "a radical critique of colonialism/imperialism and neocolonialism" (A. Prasad, 2003, p. 7). A large percentage of postcolonial theory is focused on interrogating and deconstructing Western practice and thought in order to reveal the (neo)colonial dynamics therein (A. Prasad, 2003).

There is a dearth of postcolonial studies in communication (Shome & Hegde, 2002), and qualitative communication research in postcolonial theory is especially underrepresented. In fact, only a few postcolonial ethnographies (Supriya, 2002; Supriya, 2004) or qualitative studies (Norander & Harter, 2012; Pal & Buzzanell, 2013) exist. This may stem from the West's historical use of ethnography to support (neo)colonial mindsets (Prasad, P., 2003). However, this project used ethnographic methods to critically analyze the construction of Western narratives *regarding the West itself*, and how such narratives affect relationships with other peoples. By turning the gaze back on the West (though being careful not simply to re-center the West), ethnographic and other qualitative research methods can be appropriated for postcolonial use.

Intersectional Concerns

A postcolonial theoretical position often leads to an emphasis on intersectionality. Intersectionality emphasizes the impossibility of extricating one individual facet of power from others; that is, neocolonialism cannot be analyzed thoroughly without concurrently examining gender, race/ethnicity, and class (Acker, 2006; McCall, 2001; West & Fenstermaker, 2002). Although it is difficult to keep a focus on these continually interweaving power dynamics in the moment of participant observation or interview conduction, the process of revealing U.S.-centric thought underlying constructions of others requires continual interrogation of *all* aspects of representation, including gender, race, and nation. Intersectional perspectives thus formed the basis for this project, and set it apart from other analyses of American exceptionalism. In analyzing with an eye towards intersectionality, this study

found that the negotiation of U.S. American exceptionalism often assumed certain perspectives on, and discourses of, race, gender, and nation. The following section briefly describes the research methods before moving into analysis.

METHODS

This research draws from both participant observation and interviews. Over the course of six months, I attended formal Peace Corps information sessions (15–20 people in attendance), special recruitment events (100–200 people in attendance), and classroom announcements (4–30 people in attendance) at a large university in the western U.S. Each event included 2–20 RPCVs describing their experiences to prospective volunteers. As a RPCV who served in Tanzania from 2007–2009, I was truly a *participant* observer, and took field notes detailing not only information and experiences presented by recruiters and returned volunteers, and questions and comments from prospective applicants, but also my own contributions and responses. My experiences in Tanzania were woven throughout my field notes as well, when salient to the happenings at hand. As a participant observer in Peace Corps recruitment events, I was often asked by prospective volunteers if they could hear about my experiences over coffee at a later date. Such meetings functioned as both participant interactions and interviews, so I wrote field notes in addition to recording the dialogue. In a way, these meetings may be conceptualized as ethnographic interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). They were organic and emergent from the scene. Though they did not occur in that very moment in time, they were still an "*informal, conversational interview*" (p. 176, emphasis in original), as the prospective volunteers were able to ask me just as many questions as I asked them. In total, I collected 20 hours of participant observation and 57 pages of single-spaced field notes.

Additionally, I conducted in-depth interviews with 11 recently returned (i.e., in the past five years) Peace Corps volunteers. I found initial interview subjects by sending out a call on the local RPCV listserv, and continued by soliciting further subjects through snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I used an interview guide as a basic structure, but often added questions based on the unique experiences of the interviewees. All of the interviewees lived in the surrounding metropolitan area, self-identified as white, and were between 25 and 35 years old. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, totaling 200 pages of single-spaced transcriptions. In order to protect the identity of the people I interviewed, I have not only changed their names, but also removed the name of the country of service.

Drawing from these field notes and interview transcripts, this study links my own personal experience as a RPCV and field researcher with the narratives of

other returned volunteers. To find the themes that create the basis for this study, I focused first on an emic approach to the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), using open coding to find salient themes. During the process of axial coding, I allowed my postcolonial and intersectional theoretical positions to guide the analysis, looking etically for connections to race, gender, and nation. Although I specifically asked interview participants what it was like being of their race and gender in their countries of service, I was surprised to find that what it meant to be "American" came up unsolicited in every interview. The argument of this study emerged by looking for the connections and disjunctures between these facets of identity throughout the data.

Although the textual fragments that I choose to use in this piece come more often from interviews than participant observation, the same themes appear throughout my fieldwork. The interview format made it easier for participants to delve in-depth into themes that were present in less detail in participant observation events. Thus, these quotations were chosen as they gave a more detailed account of the phenomenon, but they are also representative of narratives found in other ethnographic contexts.

EXCEPTIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS: WHITENESS, MASCULINITY, AND THE ABILITY TO EMPOWER

The (White) Exceptional American

After a large recruitment session, a prospective volunteer voiced interest in meeting for coffee to talk about my experiences in the Peace Corps. She asked me a few questions, and noted in one of my responses that I had shifted from studying physics as an undergraduate to completing graduate work in communication. She asked me why my life plan had changed so drastically.

As I reflect on the conversation, I remember having difficulty thinking of how to explain the complicated situations which had first drawn my attention to structures of inequality. So, I began by describing the gendered dynamics at work in my school in Sub-Saharan Africa. Conscious of the risk that my narrative could be read as villainizing men of my host country, I attempted to render a narrative that rather implicated U.S. Americans as perpetrators. I said:

> I got more interested in what are those dynamics, the social structures that keep people from being equal in different situations. A lot of it wasn't just gender too, but also racial-nation inequalities that I saw happening. Like, volunteers at some point, some volunteers, not everyone, would begin to say things like, "Well, I deserve to sit at the head table at the banquet, because I'm white." And it's kind of a mindset that you get in to some extent, because you're constantly being treated differently. Not just because—cuz not all volunteers

> are white, obviously, that one was—but being an American, being different, being from the place where they would all like to go live, you get treated differently. And if you let that go to your head, I don't know, people started saying things where I'm like, "I don't think that's ok." But when you're just treated that way day after day after day after day after day, you start thinking about yourself differently.

In my attempt to side-step around construing systemic power issues as the problem solely of my host country, I ironically end up reinforcing a racialized view of U.S. Americans as normatively white.

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

In other words, though I knew volunteers of color and would never consciously claim their experience to be the same as mine, being unconscious of my own racial privilege led me to generalize my experience. Unfortunately, when reviewing my field notes and interview transcripts, I realized that the excerpt above is not an isolated instance of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010); rather, it is indicative of a theme found throughout white volunteer narratives. All the volunteers that I interviewed self-identified as white,[4] and all of the volunteers I spoke with at recruiting events had light-toned skin. On multiple occasions, they revealed a similar assumption to my own. Though these racist assumptions are clearly a problem in and of themselves, they also connect to the discourse of American exceptionalism.

The assumption in the narratives of white volunteers that their experience is representative of volunteers in general ties into both the idea that being U.S. American is special or exceptional, and the invisibility of whiteness (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Shome, 2000). The assumption of American exceptionalism implies whiteness in RPCV narratives, and is brought out most strongly when the implied whiteness is challenged. When American exceptionalism is challenged because the volunteer in question is not white, the contradictions inherent in American exceptionalism are revealed, and the white volunteer does not know how to make sense of the situation.

The following interview excerpt is an excellent example. Linda, a RPCV who served in a Sub-Saharan African country, describes her experience hitchhiking home one night with friends, on an evening when they had a particularly difficult time finding a ride:

> I was traveling with two other Peace Corps volunteers, another white person like myself, and then an African American. And when I pulled over a car, it was an Afrikaner, and he said, "I don't take black people." And I said—I mean, I should have—this is how I look back on it. I should've just said, "Okay. See you later." You know? I don't want to be with someone who says comments like that. But instead I was like, "Well, he's *American*!" And, you know, tried to, I don't know, reason with him that way. And so he said yes, but then the whole car ride he kept trying to be almost apologetic and say things like, "I'm not racist, but…" and go on with his stories of how he saw differences between whites and blacks. And it was really uncomfortable for all three of the American volunteers, but especially for the African American volunteer. …It felt bad, felt wrong. It felt wrong even for me to say—I don't know why I get so stuck on this—but why would I reason with him, "But he's an American"? You know? I mean, I know I was appealing to him and making him maybe think about it, but I just don't feel like that should be even an argument, you know? It shouldn't be part of the fundamental reason why he should take us, because he's an American. Yeah, he's black, but he's American. I felt really bad about that, but at the moment I just wanted to get home. And, I mean, I told my African American volunteer friend, I told him what he said. I was like, "Do you want to get in the car with someone who just said that?" And he hesitated, but he was like, "Let's go." So he also had the same feeling of just wanting to get down the road.

Importantly, Linda's attempt to reason with the driver by labeling her Black friend "American" is narrated not only with guilt, but with confusion. First, her guilt over the comment was deflected: she focused on how difficult it was to get a ride that night and long they were waiting, and she added at the end that the African American volunteer said it was fine and wanted to take the car, too. This functions similarly to diminutives in color-blind race talk (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), which attempt to qualify the racial significance of a comment or phrase. Obviously, this is something that Linda has often reflected on. However, it still bothered and confused her. She asked rhetorically, "why would I reason with him?" and explained that she doesn't "feel like that should be even an argument" at all. Linda cannot quite figure out *why* it shouldn't be an argument, and why it bothered her so much that she tried to reason with the driver in that manner.

Fundamentally, it reveals a contradiction. In the narrative seen throughout white RPCV discourse there is an assumption that U.S. Americans are special simply by virtue of being *American*, regardless of race—a universalization of whiteness (Shome, 2000). But here is a U.S. American who is not being recognized as special. Linda has come face-to-face in this circumstance with both her privilege as U.S. American and her privilege as white, but as the combination contradicts the dominant construction of American exceptionalism, she is at an impasse. What Linda cannot quite put into words is that underlying an idea of American exceptionalism is an assumption that the exceptional American is white. The myth of American exceptionalism is a racialized myth.

The (Masculine) Exceptional American

Whiteness is not the only hidden facet of American exceptionalist discourse in RPCV speech. Additionally, there is a negotiation of masculinity in the stories of both male and female volunteers. This section focuses on female volunteer masculinity and how it allows access to American exceptionalism. Although this female struggle for masculinity disrupts some dominant power relations, it reinforces others.

When Anita, a RPCV who served in South America, was asked what her experience was like being a woman in her country of service, she replied:

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

Here, Anita's position as U.S. American gave her access to respect. This was contrasted with the way in which Anita spoke in the interview about the host country national women that she knew. Anita was respected "even though" she is a woman; however, women of her South American village were not allowed out of the house without their husband's permission, were not aware of their husband's affairs with other women, and were cat-called in the street.

Anita gained respect because they just saw her as a foreigner, and not a foreign *woman*. This begs the question: as what kind of foreigner did they see her? Certainly whiteness ties into this example, but Anita's comment also implies that her position as U.S. American gave her access to a type of masculinity. Rather than having to deal with the gender roles of that particular South American village's culture, she is to trade her status as a white U.S. American for masculine clout: the positionality of U.S. American is automatically considered a masculine positionality.

Yet, the U.S. female volunteer was only allowed access to American exceptionalism up to a point: where the performance of masculinity fails, so did the female volunteer's ability to access American exceptionalism. Thus, the exceptional American was assumed to be masculine. In the following excerpt from an interview, Tiffany described what it was like being a woman in the Sub-Saharan African country in which she served. In this story, the assumed masculinity and respect that "should" come with being U.S. American was challenged:

> I'll never forget this government official [who] said something to me that…was crass and it was inappropriate, and it was presumptuous, like something having to do with sexuality. And I called his ass out on the spot, in front of a bunch of government people. And I'm like, "What did you say to me? It is inappropriate for you to talk to me or any other woman in that manner, especially an American, on top of everything. We don't abide for this, I won't stand for this! I represent all the women in Peace Corps, I represent any other woman in

> the same position as me, I represent women from your country who you should treat with better respect." I laid into him in front of all these people….Cuz it's like, I've always felt like when people were rude to you in a degrading-gender way, I wasn't just responding for me, it wasn't my personal response, it was for all women. Because I felt like I was really standing up against huge boundaries for women. And what type of woman would I be to not stand up against this shit right now? What type of—how would I be helping anyone if I just backed down? And I would never back down.

After the government official makes an inappropriate comment about her, Tiffany's initial response implied that it was especially inappropriate for him to have said that to her because she's "American." Tiffany seemed to say that he should have known better than to say that to an American, because *Americans* won't stand for it. Tiffany's response assumed a certain masculine privilege that goes along with being U.S. American, and when that privilege is challenged by the host country national, she lashed out. Consider the way she ended her story: that she will never back down. Underlying American exceptionalism is an inherent assumption of masculinity.

My field notes display similar assumptions of U.S. female masculinity in other interactions with RPCVs. One prospective volunteer at a recruitment event described how she became interested in the Peace Corps after meeting a RPCV who had shared that during service she "had been sexually assaulted and people followed her everywhere" and was sick for almost the maximum amount of days that Peace Corps allows before being sent home, but despite these challenges the volunteer said she "wouldn't change a thing" and would "definitely," "100%" choose to do it again. This narrative made the prospective volunteer so interested in the Peace Corps that she was looking into the possibility of changing her citizenship from Canadian to U.S. American simply to be able to join. What drew this prospective volunteer was certainly not the possibility of victimization, violence, or illness, but the strength, resilience and power she saw displayed in the RPCV: A masculinity that allowed the RPCV to transcend the circumstances and implicitly placed her on a superior level of morality when compared with the host country nationals.

A second facet of Tiffany's story was how she saw it as her duty to stand up to the official on the behalf of all women of the world. She stated that she represents all women, everywhere. The idea of American exceptionalism underlay her ability to act as hero of the women of the world. Tiffany saw it as her responsibility to stand up to that comment because it represented a "boundary" to all women, and not all women in the world can or will stand up for themselves, so she must do it for them. Thus, an inherent U.S. American masculinity was assumed in the implication that females of *other* nations were not so empowered. As Mohanty (1991) describes, the discursive idea that the Western woman can and should stand up for the "Third World" functions imperialistically and constructs a monolithic "Third

World woman" who needs saving. U.S. American females are able to stand up for other (female) people of the world because they're U.S. American, and that implies masculinity—and power. By preserving the requirement of masculinity, Tiffany and other female volunteers were able to access U.S. American exceptionalism.

The (Disempowered) International Other

In RPCV discourse, whiteness and masculinity often constitute American exceptionalism. This section suggests that this exceptionalism also allows volunteers to "empower" host country nationals. Empowerment is a development discourse that is often taken for granted (Kapoor, 2008), but this study displays why it needs to be interrogated: The discourse of empowerment is based on assumptions of U.S. American exceptionalism.

During participant observation at a Peace Corps classroom announcement, one recruiter claimed, "Peace Corps is all about empowerment." This statement may seem straight-forward, yet empowerment is not a neutral concept. The construction of who can empower and who needs empowerment in these narratives is politically constructed, and often conflicts with normative volunteer values. As Fischer (1998) notes, "The volunteer was supposed to enter the third world with an open mind about how, in the end, humanity is all the same" (p. 162); however, this typical volunteer belief in universal equality conflicts with the fact that "[j]ust by being there, volunteers were a living implication that they knew how to do things and they were there to teach the locals, who did not" (p. 181).

Volunteers often spoke of "obvious" issues in their countries of service: gender equality, self-esteem, lack of resources, and racial tensions. These "obvious" problems were construed as things that U.S. Americans have the ability to help fix through empowerment. As an exemplar, one of the obvious problems that Linda saw in her Sub-Saharan African community was her students' lack of self-esteem. They often used an Arabic phrase meaning "If God wills," implying to Linda that they didn't believe they had control over their own lives, which to her was "really sad." She explained:

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

In Linda's story, there were multiple factors contributing to the students' belief—which she sees as a "myth"—that they do not have control over their lives. The first factor is that her students are black, and second that they or their parents lived through apartheid. The coupling of black skin with the experience of apartheid implies that for many years, black people were extremely oppressed, and to a large

extent, did not have control over their lives. However, now that apartheid was over, Linda saw the barriers to black students' control of their lives as also having ended. Third, she believed that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and other fatal diseases contributed to this feeling as well.

The veiled narrative in Linda's comment is that she, as an U.S. American volunteer, knew better than the students: she knew that they *can* take control of their lives. However, for some reason they didn't believe that. This knowledge led Linda to feel an imperative to help; her students clearly needed her assistance in order for them to have a better way of life. Again, this functions in an imperialistic manner that dismisses the host country national experience of the world. In Linda's narrative, believing in the "myth" that they did not have control was negatively valenced, leading to issues of self-esteem. She did not recognize this as a different way of experiencing and being in the world, but rather a mistaken view of the world based on the experiences they have that *people aren't meant to have*. The implicit assumption in this narrative is that a white, middle-class, U.S. American experience was normative, and experiences that differed—such as living under a racially oppressive regime or experiencing death as a normal, regular occurrence—caused these Sub-Saharan African students to see the world in *the wrong way*.

This constructs a need for U.S. American assistance. Similar to Cloud's (2004) study of the Western presumption that Afghan women need rescuing from their culture, here the African students need to be rescued by the (white) American from their cultural mindset. It is ironic that this serves to reinforce the Western ability to save, given that this mindset was constructed partially by white colonists (Fanon, 1963/2004; Ngũgĩ, 1986). Interestingly, this narrative of racial inability manifests differently in regard to different nations. Balaji (2011) describes how pity for the Black population of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina quickly turned to anger because of the "inherent (white) American ideal that individuals can 'pull themselves up' from adversity" (p. 59). However, U.S. Americans responded to victims of the Haitian earthquake with pity at the (racially and nationally) backwards state. The ability to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" is assumed for U.S. Americans, even U.S. Americans of color, but it is *not* thought to apply to people of "developing" countries. Yet, this emotional response of pity is not neutral, but "implicitly selfish and rooted in our desire to assert power over our Others" (Balaji, 2011, p. 64).

The discourse of empowerment is further dependent on the construction of host country national culture as monolithic and unchanging. Volunteers, in both interviews and at recruitment events, often describe the culture of their host country in a singular way. One prospective volunteer said that he applied for Peace Corps because he wanted to eventually travel the whole world, and it would be very easy to get to more developed places later on in life, so he should "knock out" the "backwater" places first. In both field notes and interviews, multiple RPCVs

referred to "the culture" of their host country as "patriarchal" or "very patriarchal." A few avoid the generalization inherent in these statements by speaking only of their own community, or the school environment in which they taught; however, there is still an assumption that patriarchy is something that exists *over there*, and not in the United States.

Volunteer narratives, in order to reconcile the perceived "need" host country nationals have to be empowered with the assumption that host country culture is static and cannot change, related current host country culture to U.S. American culture in the past. However, in their depictions, this telos of development was dependent upon U.S. American interference and assistance. Unless there was U.S. American assistance in human empowerment, the host country culture would remain static, and they would not fulfill their developmental potential and promise. This logic allowed for Peace Corps volunteers to mitigate the contradiction between a belief in national egalitarianism and American exceptionalism (Fischer, 1998).

The idea that host country cultures are simply "behind the times," and will eventually catch up to the pinnacle that has been reached by U.S. American culture was voiced by many volunteers. In an interview, Carl explained his view of gender equality issues in the developing world by saying, "You know, and in America, we've come a long way in terms of, like gender equality, and whereas in a developing country, it's like a hundred years ago." This statement problematically portrayed the U.S. as the standard for development, and revealed a U.S.-centric worldview.

The U.S.-centrism of the narrative that "developing" countries are temporally behind the United States on a linear path of development created the basis for U.S. American intervention and the enactment of empowerment. Otherwise, the host country cultures would remain stuck in the same monolithic form indefinitely. Anita, when describing her moral struggle with the way in which (heterosexual) romantic relationships worked culturally in the South American village she lived in, said:

> I feel like a lot of developing countries are, if I could relate it back to U.S. history, like fifty years ago, and how they just have to progress from that. And it's almost like they're just behind the times. Then I feel like there's at least hope that things are going to change. And it's more—let's focus on the bigger picture, and getting the infrastructure there, so that they could eventually move towards thinking in a different way and more progressive way. Because if I just started there without all of the other infrastructure existing, it didn't make sense to them, and they didn't value that at all.

Anita explains what she feels like her place was in assisting a cultural shift in gender roles. She attempted to "focus on the bigger picture" and on "getting the infrastructure there," because if she immediately attempted to get the men in her

village to marry only one woman, or allow their wives a voice, "they didn't value that at all." In her view, they were too far behind. U.S. Americans needed to help by getting the correct infrastructure in place; in other words, the culture was not going to be able to develop unless there was some structure provided to help them develop in the correct manner.

Here, unless something U.S. American was brought in, unless U.S. Americans used their exceptionality to empower the host country, the culture would remain static. Anita described this idea as providing hope that things can change. This, of course, implied that the most hoped-for situation should be the realization of the same type of development that exists in the U.S. Relegating the host country national culture to the realm of U.S.'s past allowed the volunteer to avoid having to make sense of the contradictions between the cultures, moralities, and ethics to which s/he has been exposed.

"You Just Don't Have That Same Ability": Returning American Exceptionalism Home

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

> I have a lot of pride in what I did. Which I had never really, you know, I've always done well in school, and really excelled at what I was doing, but I don't think that was ever something that I was super proud about, just because it wasn't—because I didn't take ownership for it. But I have so much ownership towards the community I was in, and the projects that I did, relationships that I still have with the town. I'm really proud of that. And I think sometimes I wonder if that, like, I'll never feel that again. Or if, at least, I'll always be looking for that, and if that's changed my perception on what I can accomplish.…Meaning like, I wonder if I'll always be feeling a lack of—like, I'm not doing enough because you just don't have that same ability. It's such a unique experience, that you're never going to find that in anything else. Right? So, it's something that I feel really proud about having achieved, but never being able to find that again. Does that make sense?

Robyn, in summing up her experience, explained that her perception of what she has the ability to accomplish has been changed, and implied now that she has returned to the United States, she will never have the chance to accomplish so much again. She does not have "that same ability" in the U.S. Robyn believed she was able to facilitate a special kind of change with her projects in South America that she may never be able to enact in her life (that is, in the United States) again.

Connected with the discourses discussed so far, Robyn implied that she will not be able to have such amazing accomplishments in the U.S. because *there is not enough to change*. The massive impact, the accomplishments that Robyn was so

proud of, could only be made in a country that is "behind," as Anita put it. When host country cultures are construed as developmentally backward, there are a variety of large changes that ostensibly need to be made before they can reach the U.S.'s level of development. Robyn can never enact that kind of change again in the U.S. because there is an assumption that the U.S. is the pinnacle of global life: in a word, exceptional.

From a volunteer

I thought long and hard about my students' problems with responsibility, choices, and goals. Perhaps, it came to me, they have such problems because they don't understand that there are decisions to be made. The answer to all things, the answer they've heard since birth, is "Mungu akipenda." If God wills. In an agrarian society, how much do you truly have control over? So much is dependent upon the rain, the soil, the sun. Will we have enough food? Mungu akipenda. Will we be able to walk to the other village today to sell vegetables? Mungu akipenda. …Where does the ability to make decisions come to play?

…How can I dare to be frustrated when I cannot encourage them to be self-motivated? I am attempting to push them into a way of thought that runs counter to the way they've seen the world for their entire lives. I cannot change the core of their worldview. …My words must sound like foolish noise. Their world has different rules. And how could you imagine that the world could possibly look different if you've never been outside of a single valley for your entire life? Landscape is always mountainous. Large boulders always dot the hills. It never rains from June to September. Everyone eats cassava. Everyone has black skin.

Except her…

Excerpt from an email of the author's to friends and family during Peace Corps service

CONCLUSION

This study examined the ways in which RPCV discourses are based in an idea of American exceptionalism. Unlike past studies that have shown how American exceptionalism is deployed to gain support for U.S. foreign policy in public discourse, this study investigated how American exceptionalism imbues day-to-day

discourse. Using an intersectional lens, it demonstrates that American exceptionalism is not simply a nationalist discourse, but also one that centers whiteness and masculinity through the way it is negotiated in conversation.

However, the particular experience of being a Peace Corps volunteer is also one that opens up possibilities for challenging American exceptionalism. Just as the volunteers cited throughout this piece have struggled with how to understand and express their experiences, the act of international volunteering is one that allows for meeting contradiction head-on, and challenging normative views. As Fischer (1998) describes,

> Volunteers' experiences overseas [force] them to break down the bars of the cultural prison. Their relationship with the Peace Corps leadership, their living conditions, their work, and their relationship with the people they [work] with all [convince] them to reevaluate many previously held cultural assumptions. (p. 3)

RPCV discourse can work to (re)constitute, shift, and even deconstruct the myth of American exceptionalism. The experience of living and working day-to-day for multiple years with people from a different country and culture creates opportunities for intense reflection on cultural presuppositions, opportunities that are not readily available to international travelers or visitors. As this study demonstrates, these opportunities often arise when facing challenges to strongly-held beliefs and assumptions. By discursively renegotiating fundamental assumptions about what relationships between the U.S. and host countries should look like, RPCV discourse has the ability to shift conceptualizations of what it means to volunteer. If RPCV discourse truly took the contradictions inherent in American exceptionalist discourse into account, how might the relationships between volunteers and host country nationals change? What might these new partnerships look like? What could be achieved with a worldview that recognizes and privileges host country national ability and knowledge?

Such challenges and contradictions offer rich opportunities to scholars, as well. The Peace Corps is an organization based on U.S. privilege, yet it can also act to challenge privilege. Moments and spaces that display this contradiction allow scholars to investigate both the problematics and possibilities created by international volunteering.

NOTES

1. Many critical scholars consider the use of "American" as conflated with the U.S. to be problematic, and indicative of a U.S.-centric worldview that obscures other North American and South American populations. As this phenomenon is often related to American exceptionalist thought, I use the designation "U.S. Americans" throughout this study for consistency, sensitivity, and clarity.

2. I use "American exceptionalism" to figure U.S.–specific attitudes and ideologies in this paper. Although I am careful in other places to denote the U.S. as something which cannot be conflated with America-in-general, the phrase "American exceptionalism" is used ubiquitously in both scholarly literature and public discourse, and will be used in an unqualified manner in this study.
3. "Returned Peace Corps volunteer" or "RPCV" is the official title given by the U.S. Peace Corps to volunteers who have completed their service. Peace Corps uses "returned" instead of "former" in order to highlight the continuing work that returned volunteers do in the U.S., educating U.S. Americans about other nations and peoples.
4. It was not my intent to interview only white returned volunteers when I began this study. Rather, it happened that no volunteers of color responded to my calls for interviews.

REFERENCES

Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & Society*, *20*, 441–464.

Balaji, M. (2011). Racializing pity: The Haiti earthquake and the plight of "others." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *28*, 50–67.

Baines, D. (2010). Gender mainstreaming in a development project: Intersectionality in a post-colonial un-doing? *Gender, Work and Organization*, *17*, 119–149.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2010). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism & racial inequality in contemporary America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Cloud, D. (2004). "To veil the threat of terror": Afghan women and the <clash of civilizations> in the imagery of the U.S. war on terrorism. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 90*, 285–306.

Cobbs Hoffman, E. (1998). *All you need is love: The Peace Corps and the spirit of the 1960s*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Edwards, J. A. (2012). An exceptional debate: The championing of and challenge to American exceptionalism. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, *15*, 351–367.

Fanon, F. (2004). *Wretched of the earth*. (R. Philcox, Trans.). New York, NY: Grove Press. (Original work published in 1963).

Fischer, F. (1998). *Making them like us: Peace Corps volunteers in the 1960s*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute Press.

Ivie, R. L., & Giner, O. (2009). American exceptionalism in a democratic idiom: Transacting the mythos of change in the 2008 presidential campaign. *Communication Studies*, *60*, 359–375.

Kapoor, I. (2008). Hyper-self-reflexive development? Spivak on representing the Third World 'Other.' *The postcolonial politics of development* (pp. 41–59). New York, NY: Routledge.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

McCall, L. (2001). *Complex inequality: Gender, class, and race in the new economy*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Mohanty, C. T. (1991). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo, & L. Torres (Eds.), *Third world women and the politics of feminism* (pp. 51–80). Bloomington, IN: Indian University Press.

Motter, J. (2010). American exceptionalism and the rhetoric of humanitarian militarism: The case of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami relief effort. *Communication Studies*, *61*, 507–525.

Nakayama, T. K., & Krizek, R. (1995). Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *81*, 291–309.

Ngũgĩ, W. T. (1986). *Decolonizing the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Pourtsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Norander, S., & Harter, L. M. (2012). Reflexivity in practice: Challenges and potentials of transnational organizing. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *26*, 74–105.

Pal, M., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2013). Breaking the myth of Indian call centers: A postcolonial analysis of resistance. *Communication Monographs*, *80*, 199–219.

Patman, R. G. (2006). Globalisation, the new US exceptionalism and the war on terror. *Third World Quarterly*, *27*, 963–986.

Peace Corps. (2014). Life is calling. How far will you go? Fact sheet. *Peace Corps.* Retrieved from http://files.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/about/pc_facts.pdf

Prasad, A. (2003). The gaze of the other: Postcolonial theory and organizational analysis. In Prasad, A. (Ed.), *Postcolonial theory and organizational analysis: A critical engagement* (pp. 3–43). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Prasad, P. (2003). The return of the native: Organizational discourses and the legacy of the ethnographic imagination. In Prasad, A. (Ed.), *Postcolonial theory and organizational analysis: A critical engagement* (pp. 149–170). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rojecki, A. (2008). Rhetorical alchemy: American exeptionalism and the war on terror. *Political Communication*, *25*, 67–88.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Shome, R. (2000). Outing whiteness. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *17*, 366–371.

Shome, R., & Hegde, R. S. (2002). Postcolonial approaches to communication: Charting the terrain, engaging the intersections. *Communication Theory*, *12*, 249–270.

Söderlind, S. (2011). Introduction: The shining of America. In S. Söderlind & J. T. Carson (Eds.), *American exceptionalisms: From Winthrop to Winfrey* (pp. 1–14). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Supriya, K. E. (2002). *Shame and recovery: Mapping identity in an Asian women's shelter*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Supriya, K. E. (2004). *Remembering empire: Power, memory, & place in postcolonial India*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

West, C., & Fenstermaker, S. (2002). Doing difference. In Fenstermaker, S., & West, C. (Eds.), *Doing gender, doing difference: Inequality, power, and institutional change*. New York, NY: Routledge.